Fact Checking the False Claims from Puerto Rico’s Cockfighters

Arguments from proponents of cockfighting are hollow, unfounded, and at odds with Congressional action and American jurisprudence

False claim: Cockfighting is a cultural right of the people of Puerto Rico.

The reality: Congress has the authority to declare cockfighting illegal, and it has done so. No jurisdiction within the U.S. should be an enclave or a refuge for this kind of intentional cruelty. “Culture” cannot be a defense for inexcusable animal abuse that also poses threats to public health and safety. Staged fights pit animals against each other for the sole purpose of gambling and entertainment. The animals are often drugged to heighten their aggression and forced to keep fighting even after they’ve suffered grievous injuries such as broken bones, deep gashes, punctured lungs and pierced eyes. In cockfighting, birds have metal weapons attached to their legs and typically suffer slow painful deaths.

The reality is, cockfighting probably started 3,000 years ago during the Roman Era, and it spread throughout the world as that empire expanded. It’s been practiced throughout much of the world ever since. Only in the last 150 years, with the rise of the global animal protection movement, has it been in retreat. Like cockfighting, there were plenty of other moral horrors that went global. Dueling. Honor killing. Repression of women. Slavery. Ubiquity and longevity are not markers of culture. They just meant that these practices were widespread and enduring. But civilized societies evolve, in the United States and across the world. That’s precisely why policymaking and enforcement are ongoing enterprises in society. We have achieved a national consensus that staged animal fighting is wrong, with prohibitions in 50 states and a federal prohibitions against all forms of animal fighting.

False claim: Puerto Rico has the right to self-determination on this issue.

The reality: In late October 2019, U.S. District Court Judge Gustavo Gelpi, a native of Puerto Rico, sided with the U.S. government and rejected the legal claims from cockfighting clubs, declaring that “[n]either the Commonwealth’s political statues, nor the Territorial Clause, impede the United States Government from enacting laws that apply to all citizens of this Nation alike, whether as a state or territory.” Indeed, Congress has upgraded the federal law against animal fighting five times in the 21st century, and the courts have upheld every provision challenged by animal fighting interests.

False claim: Puerto Rico generates $100 million in economic activity from cockfighting and more than 25,000 jobs.

The reality: Claims about the economic impacts of cockfighting are far-fetched, inaccurate, unvalidated, and inconsistent. If there were 25,000 jobs, as some suggest, that amount of employment would generate far more than $100 million in revenue. The 2012 Puerto Rico Census of Agriculture (COA) – the last available document on the website and available to the public – reports 324 “cockfighting farms” reporting 6,667 fighting cocks and sales of $1,187,102. At a single illegal cockfighting stable in Los Angeles County in 2017, there were more than 7,000 fighting birds at a single operation – underscoring that the numbers of birds
Puerto Rico officials cite is no larger than the illegal cockfighting that occurs in the mainland U.S. At the Los Angeles stable, there were perhaps just a few people overseeing the operation. Throughout the U.S. very few people are persuaded to accept an immoral and illegal action as legitimate because of a “jobs” argument.

Federal law bans any imports or exports of fighting birds or implements in all states and territories, including Puerto Rico. Those prohibitions place a hard cap on revenues generated from the core “commodities” of the cockfighting trade. Gambling by cockfighting enthusiasts on the outcome of the fights at Puerto Rico’s cockfighting venues generate very little net new revenue that contribute to the Commonwealth’s economic development. The money is mainly passed back and forth between the small number of people drawn to this form of gambling.

As a general matter, any major tourist destination, such as Puerto Rico, incurs a major economic risk by embracing or tolerating animal cruelty in any form. Many tourists will choose vacation destinations that steer clear of animal abuse. In that sense, cockfighting may be a drag on tourism economic development in the Commonwealth.

*False claim: Cockfighting is a closely regulated activity in Puerto Rico.*

*The reality: There is no evidence that this is a closely- or well-regulated industry. The last report by the Commonwealth government about cockfighting came out in 2012.*

Unfortunately, a hurricane caused a further suspension in efforts to generate a Census of Agriculture report in 2017. The Commonwealth announced an expected publication date for the next report in February 2020. The regulation of cockfighting in Puerto Rico involves no inspections of cockfighting breeding operations or the fights themselves. There appears to be no animal care regulations or on-the-ground presence to assure any type of humane treatment of animals.

The birds are not only subjected to inhumane deaths in the cockfighting pits, but the tethering of fighting roosters outside is a hazard to the birds when major storms strike. There was no safe place for the roosters when Hurricane Maria closed in on Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands devastated the islands in 2019. Most of the birds were undoubtedly killed, with waters drowning them or high winds tossing them around like rag dolls. If the people of Puerto Rico are interested in other forms of gambling and games of chance, there is a wide range of options that do not involve animal cruelty and other animal safety concerns.