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Farm Animal Welfare: Some Opinions

Michael W. Fox

The subject of farm animal welfare has evoked a wide range of responses from those involved in the livestock industry and those concerned about the humanness of intensive husbandry farming practices. Books have been published on the subject (Harrison, 1964; Mason & Singer, 1980; Dawkins, 1980 and Fox, 1980 and 1981) as well as a large number of articles in professional and popular magazines. Three international symposia dealing with animal rights have been held in the last two years (Lehman, 1980; Miller, 1981; Paterson and Ryder, 1980) and a major European conference dealing with farm animal welfare and involving veterinarians, farmers, animal scientists and animal welfare groups was held in Amsterdam in 1979 (*Anim Regul Stud* 2(3): 1980).

In the U.K., a governmental Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council has been established and codes of practice drawn up which have been copied by most of the member countries of the European Economic Community. In the U.S., humane concerns of 'factory' farming have been extensively discussed by Frank (1979) and a model draft of protective legislation drawn up. [See *Int J Stud Anim Prob* 1(6): 391-395, 1980.] Both the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology and the U.S. Animal Health Association are taking an active interest in the subject. The Institute for the Study of Animal Problems has recently conducted a small survey of veterinarians and animal scientists involved in the livestock industry in the U.S. to determine how they feel about the many husbandry practices that are now being questioned by a growing number of their professional peers in the U.K. and Europe (B.V.A., 1979).

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Poultry

Almost half the respondents did not consider themselves sufficiently involved to comment on the welfare issues of poultry. Of those who did, the majority either felt that the various practices were of no concern (e.g., slaughter methods and debeaking) or needed more research (e.g., cannibalism, vent picking, flooring and ventilation). The following comments extracted from the returns are representative of the respondents' attitudes:

"The techniques of mass production are essential to the economics of the poultry industry. However, we must at all times be cognizant of the fact that poultry are living, breathing, feeling animals with rights as such."

"Birds have a high pain threshold and do not feel pain like or to the extent many other animals do. The poultry industry is more advanced in management practices than most other animal enterprises. Stringent regulation would hamper progress in a fast changing industry."

"Anything resulting in decreased production or increased losses is already under study. Poultry industry does not have a profit margin which will tolerate continued poor husbandry practices."

"It is my opinion that if poultry are unduly stressed or inhumanely handled it will influence their productive performance. The majority of the poultry in the U.S. are housed, handled and fed in a manner to maximize productivity. I am of the opinion the operations to which there is obvious ethical or humane concern are minimal."

Some concern was expressed over certain practices, especially over the methods used to destroy chicks at hatcheries, forced moulting and the question of battery cages and overcrowding. Poor ventilation in broiler houses and methods of catching and loading birds for slaughter also evoked concern.

Pigs

Most of the respondents considered themselves sufficiently qualified to comment on pig welfare and the majority again considered that the various practices were of no concern (e.g., castration, tail docking and tusk snipping) or needed more research (e.g., floor surface and lameness or overcrowding). For example, respondents stated:

"In my experience, the confinement hog operations have tended to be more humane, overall, than many one to five sow operations where pigs have poor nutrition, no vaccinations and no warming, even though they are living under more 'natural' conditions."

"It is my feeling that the swine industry is doing a good job in all these areas. There is nothing wrong with our systems, there may be a few individual producers who violate standard procedures."

"The producer should not needlessly be submitted to regulations which increase his cost of production. At the present time (6-2-80) he is losing \$8-12 per pig marketed at 220 lbs. In large operations transgressing from the best interests of the pig in his management is expected to reduce efficiency of production so it is watched closely. The above items are those used in the larger, more efficient operations. In my opinion there is more likely to be transgressions in management not in the best interests of the pig in small to very small enterprises. Also, it is my opinion that more good would be done working in the very small enterprises if something must be done. The problem, of course, is to locate the very small enterprises and effect changes whereas the locations of the larger enterprises are obvious and thus are the enterprises that can be easily inspected and included in any regulatory program."

"Decks and cages have contributed tremendously to pig comfort and welfare through warmth and sanitation. Mortality is cut by as much as 80 percent... These pigs have benefited physically as well as socially, as evidenced by marked decreases in tail and ear biting, etc. Your organization would do well to encourage the correct use of such facilities."

On the issue of removing parts of the pig, one respondent stated that "tail docking and tusk snipping prevent more pain than they cause," while others seemed uncomfortable with the practices without necessarily being willing to condemn them. For example:

"Tail docking, as you point out, may become unnecessary at a later time when we learn how to prevent tail biting. Castration is dictated by the consumer, not the producer. Producers would like to take advantage of the gains of intact boars but consumers shun 'boar' (or bull) meat, with or without justification. Both procedures involve time and labor and would gladly be left undone by the producer. Castration will require consumer education—the producers will gladly stop because of the savings in labor."

"Castration of pigs may not be necessary but it depends a lot on slaughter weight and age."

"Most feeder-coops won't accept undocked pigs for finishing."

The smaller producers came in for some criticism: "[S]wine husbandry varies tremendously throughout the U.S. Some of our smaller operations leave much to

be desired in the care and handling of animals. These operators are decreasing in numbers rapidly." Some concern was also expressed over hog transportation and handling and over the floor surface, ventilation and stocking rates for confinement-raised hogs.

Cattle

Once again, the majority of the respondents felt that there was little or no problem with various husbandry practices (e.g., stall tying of dairy replacement calves and castration without anesthetic). However, there appeared to be more concern over the cattle welfare issues than was the case for either poultry or pigs. Twenty percent of the respondents felt that dehorning without anesthetics constituted a major welfare concern, while fifteen percent were worried about transportation and handling. For example, one respondent commented:

"Thousands of cattle become disabled annually and are shipped to slaughter. These animals are dragged into trucks by various means. Many are fit only for rendering and should humanely be killed on the farm. There are laws and regulations concerning humane slaughter, but little if any control over loading and transporting disabled animals. If disabled animals are to be transported alive more humane methods should be implemented for loading and unloading."

Another felt that social isolation was not a problem since:

"considerable self-stimulation and 'inwardness' occurs due to the rumination process. Also, cattle indulge in mutual and self-grooming. As a consequence of cudding and grooming, little or no boredom takes place in cattle."

There is a considerable amount of disagreement between different individuals, which is to be expected since welfare issues are a relatively new concern for most farm veterinarians and animal scientists in the U.S. While one respondent argues:

"Everyone has the right to his or her opinion. I would encourage those people who feel that today's livestock and poultry industries are violating animal welfare laws to look up the facts concerning how these meat animals are kept and slaughtered. I believe that the very best practices are provided and that optimum animal comfort exists,"

another states:

"Although a wealth of information is already known about all the above areas — the research results many times are not disseminated to the producer — the veterinarians are not doing

the job we're supposed to for the following reasons:

- 1) not keeping up with information available
- 2) not paid sufficiently for service rendered
- 3) people are always sure they know more than the vet

and:

"Research in behavior of animals is sorely needed for healthy production and to adequately judge humane treatment."

Qualitatively a common theme emerges, namely, that productivity is regarded as an indicator and guarantor of farm animal welfare. It is the general consensus among animal scientists, veterinarians and others involved in the livestock industry that since animal welfare and productivity are closely correlated, industry's concern over maximizing productivity will guarantee a high standard of farm animal welfare. For example:

"If there are abuses of existing animal welfare laws, such abuses should be discontinued. As a scientist, my best way to evaluate the well-being of animals is to measure the animal's response to its environment in terms of its growth, health and the quality of its carcass. The people who would question this evaluation are generally people who have expertise in areas outside the areas of livestock husbandry or livestock processing,"

and also:

"In answering your questionnaire concerning animal welfare in livestock production, I would first like to thank you for your concern. There are and have been inhumane practices in livestock production. My only concern before any further comment is that you keep in mind the key consideration: economics. If the animal does well physically (and emotionally) the producer will do well economically. What is good for the animals is ultimately good for the producer."

On the large, intensive farm, overall mass production, based not upon individual performance but upon output per unit of building space, is the modus operandi.

Individual animal performance/productivity is often suboptimal on large factory-like farms, but the practice is still profitable because of the economies of scale. Optimal productivity on an individual basis is of secondary importance to overall productivity with low-cost inputs to maximize returns. In other words, if a particular production system or scale of production promises to produce more for less, then that system will be adopted. Therefore, the claim that in the interests of profit, farm animal welfare is satisfactory on intensive factory farms is usually only true in theory.

Those concerned about the welfare of farm animals under intensive farming conditions will indeed have a difficult time in the United States and other countries to implement much needed humane reforms and to direct research funds to

further animal welfare. Veterinarians and animal scientists can help encourage a return to humane stewardship and the sensitive, empathetic husbanding of farm animals. The advent of labor saving automation on large farms brought the promise that the farmer would have more time to care for the animals. But as Carpenter and colleagues (1980) emphasize, the reverse has happened: "[L]ess time spent on chores means that more animals can be taken on and overall productivity increased; the greater the number of mass-production techniques employed the greater the alienation of the stockman from his stock and the more rigidly the animal has to conform as one of a mass to dictates of gadgetry and fashion regardless of its individual powers of adaptation." The Carpenter report subsequently states: "The fact that it is difficult to demonstrate under controlled laboratory conditions the precise instinctive behavior patterns or emotional needs of an animal should not be used as an excuse for abandoning the attempt to provide an environment in which as many as possible of these natural behavior patterns can be expressed. Here again the animal should be given the benefit of the doubt wherever possible."

Given that we must continue to exploit animals, and considering the past and present patterns of unconditional animal exploitation, the time has come to draw up ethical guidelines to define, direct and limit the quality and quantity of animal exploitation that society finds morally acceptable. In other words, personal and societal benefits derived from animal exploitation need to be carefully addressed in relation to animals' rights and our moral obligations toward them. "*There is no moral prohibition against a responsible, discriminatory, sensitive use of animals so long as there is no other way to secure the fundamental and real, as opposed to the superficial or trivial, benefit of man*" (italics mine) [Carpenter et al, 1980].

It is an essential ethical imperative to strike a golden mean, economics notwithstanding, between meeting the animal's basic needs and subjecting it to social and environmental privations and restrictions which are beyond its adaptation abilities. The following basic guidelines, Carpenter et al.'s (1980) seven minimal environmental requirements, should be adopted to govern the management of animals under humane stewardship:

- *freedom to perform natural physical movement*
- *association, where appropriate, with other animals of their own kind*
- *facilities for comfort-activities, e.g. rest, sleep and body care*
- *provision of food and water to maintain full health*
- *ability to perform daily routines of natural activities*
- *opportunity for the activities of exploration and play, especially for young animals*
- *satisfaction of minimal spatial and territorial requirements including a visual field*

Deviations from these principles should be avoided as far as possible, but where such deviations are absolutely unavoidable, efforts should be made to compensate the animal environmentally.

International collaboration and coordination of research in the field of farm animal welfare is also needed, considering the wide range of problems that have

been identified (Murphy, 1978) and the costs that further research will incur.

The challenge and the prime task of animal scientists, veterinarians and ethologists involved in the livestock industry is therefore to develop the necessary methodologies to evaluate the welfare of various farm animal species under a wide range of husbandry systems, from which welfare codes of practice, — care, housing, building design, etc. — can be generated for the benefit of both producers and the animals themselves. Hopefully, this can be accomplished without unnecessary bureaucracy.

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