

Animals, Ethics and Trade

THE CHALLENGE OF ANIMAL SENTIENCE

Edited by Jacky Turner and Joyce D'Silva

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- The use of animals for meat, for hide, for their labour and in laboratories has been justified with the assumption that unlike humans, animals aren't fully sentient beings.
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- Over twenty contributions from internationally-renowned experts on animal behaviour and agriculture include big names such as Jane Goodall, Tim Lang and Vandana Shiva.



The complexities of animal behaviour revealed in the last few decades are astonishing, but what are the implications? In this book, internationally respected contributors are brought together for the first time to debate and attempt to answer these questions. The first sections discuss scientific and ethical perspectives on the consciousness, emotions and mental abilities of animals. Later sections address how human activities such as science, law, farming, food production, trade, development and education respect or ignore animals' sentience and welfare, and review the options for changes in our policies, our practices and our thinking.

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Ideals and Realities: What Do We Owe to Farm Animals?

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The title 'Ideals and realities' was conceived by Compassion in World Farming Trust (CIWF Trust), who organized the conference out of which this book arose, but it is one that I recognize. In my two *Animal Welfare* books (Webster, 1994, 2005), Eden defines the ideal state wherein humans and the other animals can live in perfect harmony. This is an impossible goal: but one to which we should look with a cool eye and one to which we can direct our progress, however halting this may be.

When the European Commission, through the Amsterdam Protocol, formally acknowledged that farm animals are not simple commodities but sentient creatures, it committed all who use farm animals in any way, whether as producers or consumers, to a social contract, albeit one that neither we nor they can properly fulfil. The contract compels them to work and die for us, but equally compels us to respect their right to a reasonable standard of welfare through life and at the point of death. This is only fair. A further problem with the social contract is that it is we, not they, who define what is meant by fair. In this regard, the status of farm animals is similar to that of children. We define the standards according to our perception of their needs. This is becoming an ever more realistic goal, thanks to research pioneered by such as Marian Dawkins (1993) that seeks to discover what matters to animals as they seek to meet their physiological and behavioural needs, and how much these things matter. A proper understanding of the needs of farm animals can help to provide the evidence necessary to establish the moral, scientific and practical principles that should underpin good husbandry. Expressed in the simplest possible form, the aim of good husbandry should be to ensure that the animals stay fit and happy throughout their working lives. New draft UK Animal Welfare legislation proposes that it shall be an offence to predispose animals to suffering whether through defects in management, breeding or both. Management systems that involved veal crates, sow stalls and barren cages for laying hens were all once recognized as 'accepted practice' but each has been, or will be, banned (at least in Europe) on the basis that it may predispose the animals to suffering. However, it is still permissible to breed animals such as

broiler chickens and dairy cows that are not ‘fit for purpose’ because they are unable to sustain fitness throughout their working lives. Under the new legislation it may become an offence to breed the conventional broiler chicken, or indeed the Bulldog or Basset Hound.

I repeat: the responsibility to animals as stakeholders in society is shared by us all. We cannot take the cable car to the high moral ground and, at no personal cost, harangue the farmers as cruel profiteers. Very few are cruel and very few are making a profit. Standards must be set by all who, directly or indirectly, derive any value from the exploitation of animals to suit our ends, whether for food, clothing, sport or companionship. Our responsibilities may be categorized as follows:

- to acknowledge and understand sentience in animals;
- to breed and manage farm animals so as to promote good welfare and avoid suffering throughout their working lives;
- to improve farm animal welfare through an effective system of welfare assurance for farms and others involved in the food chain;
- to increase public demand for real improvements in farm animal welfare through increased understanding of the problems associated with ‘accepted agricultural practice’ and an increased awareness of the value of each individual farm animal to society.

Sentience, stress and suffering

The welfare of a sentient animal must be defined both by its physical and emotional state. In short, it must be fit and happy. I first proposed the ‘Five Freedoms’ in 1981 as a structured, comprehensive approach to defining and assessing the elements necessary to meet the physiological and behavioural needs of a sentient animal (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 1993; Webster, 1994). Freedoms 1–3 address fitness, 3–5 address happiness or ‘feeling good’. Although these have gained widespread acceptance among those who think about these things, too many animal welfare debates still fail because the protagonists are operating according to different terms of reference. Producers talk fitness, animal welfarists talk happiness. Moreover, the politicians who claim to speak for different societies assign different relative values to fit and happy. For example, the decisions to ban the sow stall in Europe but permit it in Australia and the US were based on a review of exactly the same evidence, but Europe gave greater value to behavioural needs.

It would be unprofitable to attempt to assign absolute values to each of the Five Freedoms. However, I suggest that political decisions will have no value at all unless they are based on a proper understanding of the nature of sentience in animals. My simple definition of sentience is ‘feelings that matter’. This requires some explanation. All animals receive sensations and information from

the internal and external environment. In response they use the physiological and behavioural resources available to them to act in a way designed to keep them fit and happy. Many of these responses in all animals are reflex or automatic. Sentient animals are those that have evolved mental processes for interpreting sensations and information so that they can choose what action, if any, is most appropriate to their needs. Darwin recognized sentience as an essential feature of evolutionary fitness widely distributed within the animal kingdom. Figure 13.1 provides a simple illustration of how it works. Sentient animals first process information as categories (e.g. food, predator) then interpret this information in an emotional sense: ‘Does this make me feel good or bad (or indifferent)?’ The strength of this feeling will determine the strength of motivation of the animal to do something appropriate to its physiological and behavioural needs. The strength of motivation to act is a direct measure of how much specific feelings matter to a sentient animal. Some animals will also interpret some information in a cognitive way, that is, they will incorporate reasoned thought into the decision-making process.

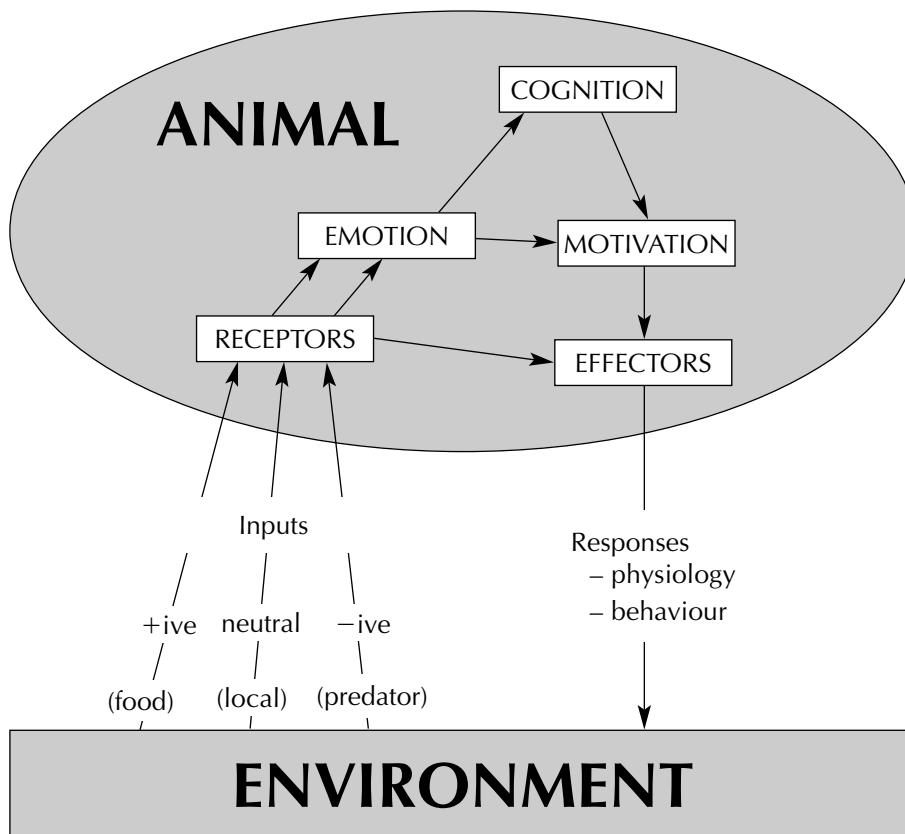


Figure 13.1 *Sentience: An emotional view of the world*

Source: Webster, 2005

When a sentient animal is faced by stress, it will act in a way designed to cope with that stress and then review the consequences. If the actions have been effective it will achieve a sense of security and satisfaction. This makes it feel more confident about its ability to deal with such stresses in the future. However, it may fail to cope, either because the stress is too severe, complex or prolonged, or because it is constrained in such a way that it is prevented from doing what it feels necessary to relieve the stress. In these circumstances its mood will shift progressively to one of anxiety or depression.

It follows from this that stress and suffering are not synonymous. Suffering occurs when an animal learns that it is unable to cope with stress. However, the capacity for suffering is an inevitable consequence of the evolution of sentience, that is, all sentient animals have the capacity to suffer. This class certainly includes all the mammals and birds that we farm for food and probably the fish as well.

Sentience and suffering are manifestations of the fact that animals are primarily motivated by their emotions. The other driver of choice in animals, the cognitive or reasoned response, is certainly more developed in humans than in other animals and probably, although not certainly, more developed in primates than other mammals and birds. However, the potential for suffering is primarily determined by the emotional, rather than the reasoned response to stress. We cannot therefore assume that the species most similar to man are those that experience the greatest intensity of suffering. If you have difficulty with this concept, consider the case of a child with Down's syndrome. Such children may lack the cognitive abilities of an educationally normal child but they lack nothing in their capacity to feel joy and pain.

Management and breeding practices 'likely to cause suffering'

My next recommendation for action to improve farm animal welfare is directed specifically at campaigning groups such as CIWF. This recommendation arises directly from the draft Animal Welfare Bill (England and Wales) (available at www.defra.gov.uk), which will impose upon owners a duty of care to ensure the welfare of animals based on existing good practice. In other words, it will no longer be necessary to prove that suffering has occurred. It should be possible to bring a prosecution on the basis that it is an offence to keep or breed animals in a manner that would be considered by a competent and compassionate individual as likely to cause suffering. This new law should, at last, address Ruth Harrison's grim paradox: 'If one person is unkind to an animal it is considered cruelty but where a lot of people are unkind to a lot of animals, especially in the name of commerce, the cruelty is defended, and once large sums of money are involved, will be defended to the last by otherwise intelligent people' (Harrison, 1964).

CIWF has repeatedly challenged existing law by bringing prosecutions against individual companies on the basis of systematic disregard for animal

welfare. In the 1980s they prosecuted a white veal unit for rearing calves in extreme confinement; in 2003 they took the UK government to the High Court for breeding broiler chickens in a cruel manner. In both cases they lost on the basis that these things were ‘accepted agricultural practice’. However, in the case of veal calves, European Law now recognizes that the CIWF were right all along. When the new Animal Welfare Bill becomes law it will be time to confront the broiler issue once more. Since the international broiler industry is dominated by less than five breeding companies that supply over 80 per cent of the world market, it would not be too difficult to achieve a significant improvement in broiler welfare through a ban on the commercial sale of strains that fail to meet defined standards in relation to leg disorders and cardiac failure. This would have to be subject to strict independent review and enacted sympathetically to allow breeders to change their specifications. Nevertheless I see no difference in principle between existing European Law that requires egg producers to provide a cage to new, improved specifications within ten years and a law that required broiler breeders to produce within ten years a bird to new, improved specifications for lifetime fitness.

Welfare-based quality assurance

Wherever shoppers for food are offered a choice and have a reasonable income, they demand quality. They can set their own standards for qualities such as appearance, taste and price. However, they have to take other things on trust, such as source, food safety and production standards, which, of course, include animal welfare. This has generated a plethora of farm assurance schemes ranging (in the UK) from the ‘Little Red Tractor’¹ to organic standards set by the Soil Association and ‘Freedom Food’ welfare standards set by the RSPCA. The intention is that both consumers and producers should benefit from a system that adds value based on the quality of the production methods. Organic food standards (which include a proper concern for animal welfare) have been conspicuously successful. Standards based strictly on animal welfare have not yet fared so well, with the notable exception of free range egg production according to the ‘Freedom Foods’ standards that now make up about half of total egg sales in many UK supermarkets.

The most important question for consumers, and indeed the animals, is ‘Do these welfare-assurance schemes deliver what they claim to deliver?’ Do they:

- ensure good standards of animal welfare?
- ensure better standards of animal welfare than on non-assured farms?
- address specific welfare problems as they occur?
- incorporate a protocol for regular review and upgrading of standards?

At present, the answer to all these questions is either ‘No’ or ‘Don’t know’. Nearly all current standards are based on measures of the resources and records

necessary to promote good husbandry. This is good as far as it goes but it fails to address the most important questions: ‘Are the animals fit and how do they feel?’ At Bristol, my colleagues David Main, Becky Whay and I have developed animal-based protocols for the direct assessment of animal welfare outcomes. These have been used as an independent audit of the RSPCA Freedom Food scheme. To summarize our published and unpublished work very briefly, I can say that the welfare of the free range hens in our study, in general, looked good, but dairy cows had their problems, especially lameness, whether or not the farms were accredited to Freedom Foods or organic standards (see Main et al, 2003; Whay et al, 2003).

One of the main problems with farm assurance schemes is that they can simply become pieces of paper to be filed away between inspections. A scheme for farm animal health and welfare becomes effective only if it is part of a dynamic strategy to ensure and improve standards. This is illustrated in Figure 13.2. The accreditation body sets husbandry and welfare standards acceptable to both producers and consumers/retailers. The sequence of events for the producer is as follows. S/he first carries out a self-assessment of the enterprise to check on compliance with standards and identify any problems. An independent monitor then assesses the unit using a protocol looking mainly at welfare outcomes, such as the amount of lameness that is found in a group of animals or other measurable indications of welfare. The farmer, monitor and veterinary surgeon then address any immediate problems and devise a living strategy for health and welfare. This strategy is reviewed after an appropriate time (e.g. one year, or less if there are problems that need to be resolved quickly). The effectiveness of the strategy then feeds back to the farmer for further self-assessment and to the accreditation body who can benchmark the farm against approved standards and provide real assurance to the public as to what is being done. This sets in motion a virtuous cycle of review, action, improvement and further review.

Any welfare-assurance scheme will, of course, work only if the public is aware of it, values its standards and trusts the assurances that it provides. It is necessary therefore also to set in motion a second virtuous cycle of information transfer between the accreditation authority and the public that sets out clearly the quality standards and provides honest evidence to indicate how well the scheme is working. In this way all stakeholders can benefit: consumers, society and the animals themselves.

Increasing public demand for farm animal welfare

I cannot reiterate too often the message that if we are to achieve improved welfare standards for the farm animals then the lead must be given by the majority who consume these products not the minority who produce them. The drive towards proper respect for animals in society and proper treatment of animals in society should be driven by three engines for change, all operating together:

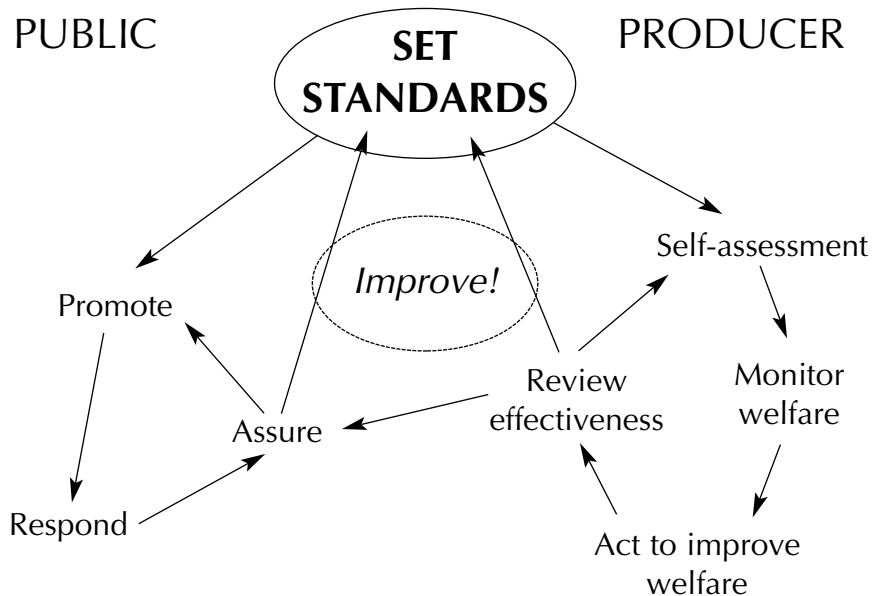


Figure 13.2 *Quality control and quality assurance: The two virtuous cycles*

- 1 increased international awareness of the nature of animal sentience and the responsibilities that this entails;
- 2 realistic, practical, step-by-step strategies for improving animal welfare within the context of other, equally valid aspirations of society;
- 3 a policy of education that will expand the human demand for welfare standards deemed acceptable by the animals themselves.

The first action, increasing awareness, is perhaps the most important of all. Too many people in too many regions of the world are simply not aware of the nature of sentience and suffering in farm animals. Once they are, their attitudes should improve (if only a bit). Animal welfare charities like CIWF, RSPCA and the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) have demonstrated that they are the most effective media for spreading this awareness. The second action, the development of effective strategies for improving farm animal welfare, depends on continued progress in our understanding of what it takes to keep farm animals fit and happy, and the application and marketing of these principles through the coupled virtuous cycles of quality assurance and quality control (Figure 13.2).

The final key necessary to convert right thought into right action is *education*. It is right to work towards an increased *awareness* of the nature of animal sentience and animal suffering, but it is not enough. All those who are actively involved with animal farming, in any way, need a proper education. This requires a profound understanding of the science, ethics and politics necessary to work towards a fair social contract between humans and animals. I cannot begin to expound on this in a brief chapter. I shall simply outline my view of the rights and responsibilities of the main stakeholders in a social contract that gives proper respect to animals within society (Table 13.1). Consumers have rights to wholesome, affordable food, but this carries the responsibility to demand high standards of animal welfare. It is an actuarial fact (not a moral judgement) that more could be achieved for farm animal welfare by the majority who consume animal products than the small minority (vegans, not ovo-lacto vegetarians) who avoid the issue altogether. Farmers have the responsibility to ensure the highest possible welfare standards for their animals but these standards are determined by what society is prepared to pay. Farmers have the right to receive a fair reward for their efforts, measured both in terms of income and pride in their work. It is in their interests to improve their own quality of life by promoting increased quality rather than quantity of production. Finally, the farm animals, stakeholders according to our terms, have the right to be fit and happy throughout life and unafraid at the point of death. Their contribution to the contract is to work for us and to die at a time of our choosing. If this appears to be unfair, then death itself would appear to be unfair. Few of us die at a time of our own choosing and none of us escape death altogether.

Table 13.1 *The social contract between humans and animals: Rights and responsibilities*

Stakeholder	Rights	Responsibilities
Consumer	Good, affordable food	Demand high-welfare food
Farmer	A fair income and pride in work	Assure the highest possible standards level of animal welfare
Animals	To be fit and happy in life	To work and die at a time of our choosing

Finally, but not in conclusion

I conclude by quoting from the closing chapter from my book *Limping towards Eden*, because it encapsulates my essential message:

And so to bed. This is the end, not of a journey; merely a very long day on a journey that has no end. In *A Cool Eye towards Eden* (Webster, 1994), I was able to set down guidelines for the understanding of animal welfare based on the study of how it feels to be an animal. I was then able to progress to careful polemic; a constructive approach to the problem of man's dominion over the animals. Much of this could be considered in an abstract and academic sort of way because, at the time, the journey had scarcely begun. Now we are well into our journey and limping a little because the going is hard. It was relatively easy, and very satisfying, to pronounce on what should be done in the interests of animal welfare. It is harder, and more frustrating, to make real progress within a world of messy realities and conflicting objectives. This is therefore a tale of work in progress and work that will still be in progress long after I am gone. As such it would not, I think, be fitting to conclude with a phrase as exalted as that with which I closed the 'Cool Eye', namely Albert Schweitzer's assertion that 'Until he extends the circle of his compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace.' Embarked upon an endless journey, the hopeful traveller needs something more down beat. 'The path of duty lies in what is near.' We may never expect to see our final destination but, for those who are prepared to open their eyes, the immediate horizon is full of promise.

(Webster, 2005)

Note

- 1 The Little Red Tractor is the mark of Assured Food Standards, a food assurance scheme set up by the National Farmers Union, The Meat and Livestock Commission, the British Retail Consortium and others in the UK food industry.

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