

Animals can't speak for themselves

Who determines what counts as proper animal welfare? There is a widespread expectation that science will deliver a decisive verdict in highly-charged social controversies; but are such expectations justified? The “animal sciences” perspective on animal welfare is certainly significant, but it is not the only viewpoint. Human perspectives and scientific perspectives based on knowledge and observation of animals are complementary.

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If cats could choose, they would choose Whiskas' says the advert. But it isn't up to the cat. Cats don't have money, they don't speak our language, and we don't speak theirs. So people speak on the cat's behalf: the pet food manufacturer, the owner, the animal scientists and various other experts, whether self-appointed or not. This is the way it has always been in the debate about animal welfare.

“Animal welfare”, a term with a wide range of meanings

Whatever farmers, animal protection organisations, legislators, admen, consumers and animal scientists may say about animal welfare, it is no more than human interpretation. No human being can determine whether an animal is happy or not. People differ in their interpretation of what constitutes a good life for an animal. For one person, this may mean being well looked-after, for another it may mean a natural environment, with all the associated risks. This is not to say that every opinion about animal welfare is of equal value. Animals are certainly not dumb. The sounds they make, their behaviour and their physiology provide signals we can use to investigate what they find pleasant and unpleasant. Chronic stress and stereotypical behaviour are significant and measurable indicators, as are the efforts animals are willing to make to access particular facilities. In general, scientific investigation can make it possible to determine whether animals are experiencing (suffering) distress; much less is known about the significance of positive experiences for an animal. The animal welfare debate also covers the quality of life for animals, something about which scientists have no special authority. Science cannot claim to have a monopoly when it comes to determining “proper” animal welfare. Look for example at mud baths for pigs. Pigs will use such facilities, if they are given the opportunity; they enjoy it, but that is not enough for us to say

that it is essential. If you provide truffles for them, they will eat them, but that doesn't mean that they will suffer if they don't get truffles. All the same, there are those who will say that a mud bath is a precondition for proper welfare for pigs, because their species use mud baths in their natural environment. That is not a persuasive logical argument: our food animals do not live in nature, their life is different in all kinds of ways. It can, however, constitute a legitimate normative position: “the life of production animals should approximate their life in natural conditions”. But like any normative position, it is not susceptible to scientific proof.

Two perspectives on animal welfare

The differences in the interpretation of animal welfare have led to the Animal Sciences Group's proposal to the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality that a distinction should be made between two perspectives on animal welfare:

- Knowledge about and observations of animals: all forms of distress experienced by animals whose nature and existence we are able to establish and evidence scientifically.
- Human perspectives on what animals deserve, and what may harm them.

The Ministry asked the ASG to draw up a scientific overview of welfare problems in the animal husbandry sector, setting priorities for approaches to these problems. The ASG wished to draw a sharp distinction between those statements about animal welfare which can be supported scientifically and those which can not. The ASG further concluded that any conclusion about what constitutes proper animal welfare must be the result of social consensus. On the basis of the first perspective, the ASG have provided an evidence-based estimate of the degree to which our farm animals experience their environment as harmful. We have placed this under the heading of “distress”, in order to make a distinction with the broader concept of “animal welfare”.

For this purpose, the ASG used data relating,

for example, to the health condition of animals and their levels of anxiety, stress and deviant behaviour. Many welfare problems in the animal husbandry sector in the Netherlands are associated with such distress, for example the consequences of a lack of movement, poor flooring, boredom and parasites. But what are we to say about welfare problems where it is not possible to establish the animal's level of distress? How “wrong” is the killing of day-old chicks? How important is outdoor access for animals? How necessary is sex? Why are short-lived painful interventions (like the castration of piglets) far more conspicuous in the debate than the chronic hunger of broiler chicken dams or the respiratory problems associated with the feeding of horses?

A multi-level discussion

Questions like these suggest that the debate about animal welfare is taking place at multiple levels: what people think animals deserve, or what people feel may be harmful to animals, is equal in significance to scientific knowledge about animal suffering. Views about what is natural, matters of scale, industrialisation, the intrinsic value and the integrity of animals, and our responsibility for animals we have shaped to our own ends by breeding, all these count in forming our judgements about whether a particular welfare problem should be prioritised. This is separate from the question whether that problem is the most urgent for the animal itself, or whether it actually exists at all. Human convictions about animal welfare arise partly from our implicit knowledge about animals:



HUMAN NATURE

Human beings can place themselves in the position of an animal because we share significant characteristics with animals. That knowledge is not “objective”, and may be mixed up with attitudes that are more about ourselves than about animals, but it is still certainly relevant to the debate. Making a distinction between these two perspectives allows us to give scientific knowledge its proper place in the social debate about animal welfare, without claiming that it has exclusive rights to speak on their behalf. Animals may not be able to speak for themselves, but neither have they appointed a single spokesman to speak on their behalf.

Cartoon: ASG

Celia Steegmann: “Working together for better animal welfare”

Wind-sucking and bar-biting horses, is that a natural behaviour or a sign of distress? Celia Steegmann, a member of the Ministry of Agriculture's policy staff, gives this as an example of what she came across in discussions about what exactly constitutes animal welfare. “In the case of animal distress, we have been able to develop precise criteria to describe the most natural behaviour of animals, information that was lacking in the past. We can take measurements to show how animals are feeling, and on the other hand we inform livestock holders about the animal's needs.” She uses the example of horses to show the lack of knowledge in this area among those caring for horses. “Some people think this is normal, we even have a nice term for it, “stable vices”, but it is not a natural form of behaviour.” Celia is closely involved in efforts to improve animal welfare. “These issues have been on the Ministry's agenda for some time, but they have never been high enough on the political agenda for policy to be developed across the board.” However the matter is now receiving more attention, with various political parties making their voices heard and more interest in society generally in the position of animals in animal husbandry. The present study analyses welfare into a number of separate concepts. “We prefer to talk about ‘distress’. The killing of day-old chicks, for example, is really an issue that goes beyond animal welfare. The animal feels very little distress since the killing is done very swiftly; the questions are more about the ethical aspects of keeping animals. The Policy Document on Animal Welfare gives a central place to animal distress, while the more ethical topics are not addressed in detail; however, this is a discussion which the Ministry will be conducting with society in coming years.”

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