

Elsbeth Stassen: ‘The limits have been reached in livestock farming’

Without resilience, no animal welfare

Professor of Animals and Society Elsbeth Stassen retires on 21 November. She has seen the value of individual animals in the livestock sector plummet over the last 50 years, with all the consequences that has for animal welfare. ‘Intensification creates a downward spiral.’

text Tessa Louwerens photo Dick Middendorp

How has our relationship with animals changed in the past few decades?

‘When I started my degree in Veterinary Science in 1971, farms were small-scale family businesses and each individual animal had great emotional and economic value. The Netherlands is now the biggest exporter of animal products after the United States. To achieve that, production per animal had to go up, larger numbers were kept and animals were transported over bigger distances. That led to devaluation of the individual animal and various welfare problems.’

What is animal welfare, actually?

‘Until the 1980s, the emphasis lay on preventing suffering and optimizing the animal’s functioning. But there is more to animal welfare than that. Levels of stress, pleasure and pain, and being able to display natural behaviour are all part of animal welfare. Every species also has specific needs. On the basis of this perception, we have legislation that says we should respect the animal’s intrinsic value, apart from the functional value we ascribe to it, such as meat production.’

That sounds clear enough. And yet there is a lot of discussion about how we treat animals.
‘Moral principles are not off-the-shelf guides

for our behaviour. A lot depends on which aspect of welfare you consider the most important. And there’s the rub. Livestock farmers care about animals and look after them, but they see welfare primarily from the point of view of the health and functioning of the animal within the context their farming system. Citizens think it’s important for the animals to live as naturally as possible. For the animals themselves, it’s all important: health, functioning, how they feel and whether their behaviour is natural.’

‘An animal that can’t display its natural behaviour can’t cope with change’

What is your vision on livestock farming?

‘According to Marten Scheffer (professor of Aquatic Ecology and Water Quality Management, ed.), every system – an organism, an ecosystem or an economic system – has its own degree of resilience, enabling it to cope with

change. Once the limits of that are reached, the consequences are disastrous, and intensive livestock farming is no exception. Take tail-biting, a serious problem in pig farming. Pigs are intelligent and want to explore and root in the soil. If they are kept in a bare, unstimulating environment where they can’t display their natural behaviour, their resilience goes down. A change in temperature or feed can cause them to start biting each other’s tails en masse. The European Commission banned the routine docking of pigs’ tails 25 years ago, but no one has yet managed to stop the tail-biting because there isn’t another solution to it in the current systems. Different housing and pen enrichment could change that, because they would improve the pigs’ resilience.

Another example is transport. Last summer a lot of animals died in trucks on the way to the abattoir. Heat regulations ban transport at outdoor temperatures above 35 degrees. But we know that chicks and pigs experience heat stress at much lower temperatures than that. Why such a high threshold? Because of a lack of resilience in the production chain. Livestock farmers can only keep the animals in their sheds for a day or two longer before the next batch of animals is delivered. These

examples show that intensification creates a downward spiral, with more and more loss of resilience.'

How do we break the deadlock and who has to do it?


'Criticism from society is increasing, and so is the frustration among livestock farmers. They are locked into a system in which they have to produce at rock-bottom prices. Animal welfare is a shared responsibility of the supply chain, the government and the consumer. Consumers are accused of hypocrisy because they consider welfare important but they want cheap products. That is not helpful and it is only partially true, because 70 per

cent of the cheap meat is exported. Dutch consumers are increasingly buying animal-friendly products and the EU Barometer shows that they are prepared to pay more for them. But then the information they get should be transparent. Campina, for example, now has a label: On the Way to Planet Proof. As a consumer, you think you're doing the right thing, whereas the improvements are minimal.'

What does your ideal future look like?

'We have to find a new balance in which respect for people, animals and the environment comes first. The government must take a clear lead in this, otherwise we will just go on

papering over the cracks. You can see that happening now with the nitrogen crisis, because the underlying issue is not being addressed. Farmers need clear long-term directives, and not to be repeatedly faced with unsystematic modifications.

In my ideal future, the agriculture sector in the Netherlands exports innovative concepts, technologies and products. That calls for multidisciplinary research, and moral considerations should play a big role in that. When we develop new technology, such as precision agriculture, we should stop focussing solely on improving the functioning of animals. Scientists and vets have a duty to consider the interests of people, animals and the environment, and to put them in perspective. Ethics is indispensable there, and deserves a more prominent place in the curriculum.' 

ELSBETH STASSEN (BRED, 1953)

1971-1977	Degree in Veterinary Science, Utrecht University (UU)
1977-1979	Practising vet
1979-1984	PhD in Veterinary Science (<i>cum laude</i>), UU
1984-2003	Associate Professor of Bovine Farm Animal Health, UU
1996-2003	Professor by special appointment of Human-Animal Relations, UU
2004-2019	Professor of Animals and Society in the Adaptation Physiology chair group, WUR

Elsbeth Stassen lives in Havelte in Drenthe province, and has a partner, two sons, four goats and a cat. She will carry on with her work for the Central Authority for Scientific Procedures on Animals after 21 November and will continue working for WUR on the external staff.

▼ Elsbeth Stassen with Zara, one of her four goats.

