

Animal etiquette according to WUR and UU

Animal love

The relationship between humans and animals is complicated. We love them and live with them, but at the same time we use them, modify them and kill them. The question of whether we treat animals decently and ethically is bothering us more and more. At CenSAS, everything revolves around that question.

text Tessa Louwerens *photo* Shutterstock.com



‘People expect a lot from animals, really,’ says Ludo Hellebrekers, director of Wageningen Bioveterinary Research and co-founder of CenSAS, the Centre for Sustainable Animal Stewardship. CenSAS, a collaboration between Utrecht University and Wageningen University & Research, does research, teaches courses and facilitates a public dialogue on issues of human-animal relations, animal welfare and animal ethics. ‘At CenSAS we get together with relevant parties to think about how people and animals can live together in a sustainable and ethical way,’ says Franck Meijboom, associate professor of the Ethics of Human-Animal Interactions at Utrecht University and head of CenSAS.

HUMANS AND ANIMALS

The Dutch give increasing importance to animal welfare, shows a public survey by the government’s Council on Animal Affairs in 2019. Nearly everyone said that people have a moral obligation to treat animals well. As many as a quarter of respondents thought humans and animals are equal. ‘Animals are increasingly believed to have self-awareness and a will of their own, with the capacity to strive to achieve goals and a wish to lead a happy life,’ says Meijboom. At the same time, the public debates on animal-related issues are becoming more heated and more polarized. Some people think we should not eat animals, while others see them primarily as a source of income, and there is also a group of people who think animals should have the same rights as humans. Meijboom: ‘With so many interests and views on the right way to treat animals, it is not easy to find solutions that everyone involved can live with.’

PESTS, LAB ANIMALS AND PETS

How we look at animals depends on the context. In the Netherlands, we don’t think it’s OK just to kill dogs and cats, but we have very different ideas about killing mosquitoes, pigs or mice. Rats are perhaps the most revealing example of our ambivalent attitude to animals: some rats

are loved as pets, some are used as lab animals, and some are poisoned as vermin. Why do we think in such different ways about the same animal species? Meijboom: ‘We are very good at framing animals.’ Give an animal a name and it’s your best friend. But label it as vermin, and most of the arguments about animal welfare disappear into thin air.

PRODUCTION ANIMAL

You come across issues of animal welfare everywhere, but at the moment it is the agriculture sector that is coming in for the most scrutiny. Take the veal industry, which is criticized on several counts, including the long hours the calves spend in transit from other countries to the Netherlands, where they are fattened. Meijboom: ‘Topics like this get into the

‘Animals really are not better off if we project our needs onto them’

media, although the coverage can be incomplete. That is a pity, but on the other hand it can focus the discussion. I think it is important not just to focus on what is wrong with the sector now, but above all to look at how we can arrive at sustainable long-term solutions. To do that we must look at the entire supply chain, including the consumer, to find out where the risks lie and how we can make improvements for people, animals and the environment by working with stakeholders such as breeders and transport companies, retailers and livestock farmers.’

OVERFED CHICKENS

CenSAS also wants to make a point of tackling less widely publicized problems. Overfed battery broiler chickens have been in the news a lot, but you seldom hear anything about

the hens and cockerels at breeder farms. Meijboom: 'Just like their offspring, the parent animals are genetically selected to grow quickly. In the case of the chicks, the feed is adjusted to do that, but that is not possible with parent birds: too much feed reduces their fertility. And because they live longer and therefore go on growing for longer, they would get too heavy, which causes health problems.' It can be assumed that the parent birds are constantly hungry. CenSAS researches the underlying questions: is it, for

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instance, possible to formulate sustainable breeding objectives that reduce or preferably do away with such problems? CenSAS engages in discussions about this with poultry breeders, poultry farmers, retailers, animal scientists and animal welfare organizations. Hellebrekers: 'We don't always have readymade answers. We put problems on the agenda and open them up for discussion. If you look at them from a broader perspective, and with as many of the relevant parties as possible, you stand a better chance of making improvements. In the end the point is that in some discussions, more attention should be paid to animals than they come in for at the moment.'

ENGINEERABLE ANIMALS

As new techniques emerge, new questions arise. An example would be CRISPR-Cas, which makes it possible to make very precise changes to the genome of animals. 'Through

selective breeding, people have of course been changing the genes of animals for a very long time,' says Hellebrekers, 'but with CRISPR-Cas it can be done much faster and more precisely.' Because genome adaptations can theoretically be applied on a large scale, the subject is currently high on the agenda. Meijboom: 'You can see a similar debate blowing up to the one in the 1990s about the bull Herman, the first genetically modified bull whose offspring's milk contained the protein lactoferrin. But while the biggest issues at that time were consumer safety and cost-effectiveness, today we debate animal welfare, and whether it's OK to make changes to an animal's DNA – and if so, under what conditions.'

Meijboom emphasizes that you cannot easily categorize techniques such as CRISPR-Cas as 'good' or 'bad'. 'The discussion also focuses on the applications of the technique. 'Animal welfare could be improved through CRISPR-Cas, for example by building a hornless gene into the cow's genome so that calves don't have to be dehorned anymore. But it that really in the animal's interests? Or should we look for ways of adapting our farming methods to the animals instead of adapting the animals to our wishes? And what if CRISPR-Cas was not used to improve animal welfare but just to boost production?'

But there is a group of people for whom it makes no difference what a technique like this is used for, notes Meijboom. 'They think that it is never acceptable to tinker with an animal's genes, because that is not up to humans or because it encroaches on the animal's intrinsic value. This leads to a completely different kind of discussion, about the value of the animal and of life, and what is the responsibility of humans in this regard.'

GOOD INTENTIONS

In the case of pets too, wellbeing is often problematic. 'The most appalling things happen to pets, often with the best of intentions,' says Hellebrekers. 'Most pet rabbits, for instance, are housed in a way that doesn't meet their natural needs at all. They are kept alone in small cages, with very little scope for their natural behaviour. The same goes for horses who are alone in a field, whereas, like rabbits, they are social animals. People mean well, but in this case they haven't got a clue about the animal's natural needs,' says Hellebrekers. 'Animals are definitely not better off when we project our own needs onto them.'

HUMAN YARDSTICKS

When people attribute human traits to animals, the welfare of the animals can suffer. Cat food with vegetables is an example of that kind of anthropomorphism. As a carnivore, a cat has absolutely no need for vegetables. But it goes way beyond that. Take the breeding of dogs with flat noses, because their flat faces melt people's hearts. That 'cute' appearance is why they suffer all kinds of health problems, such as chronic breathing difficulties.

'We project ourselves on our animals,' says Meijboom. 'That is very human, but we should watch out that we don't use our own human yardsticks to decide what is good for an

PEST ANIMALS PROJECT

Does a wild rat have less of a capacity to suffer than a pet rat or a lab rat? No, of course not. And yet it is obvious that some rats are better off than others. 'For lab animals there is a lot of legislation about animal welfare,' says Meijboom. 'And the welfare of pet rats is important to their owners – it is questionable whether that always works out well in practice, but that's another matter. But there are no arrangements for pest animals.' CenSAS is currently working on a project about pest animal control. 'We talk to researchers, pest animal controllers, animal conservationists, governments and representatives of the food industry and agricultural sector. They all seem to feel that more attention should be paid to welfare in pest animal control. After we have talked about the dilemmas they face, we will put our heads together to see how this could be improved in practice.'





◀ 'People often haven't got a clue about the animal's natural needs,' says Ludo Hellebrekers.

animal. Take a horse standing outside in the snow. A sorry sight? A horse with a winter coat is not in the least bothered by snow; but it does miss company of its own kind.' Anthropomorphism does not always cause problems straightaway, though, says Meijboom. 'A lot of animals can cope amazingly well with people's shortcomings.'

BIASED VIEW

According to Hellebrekers, the challenge is to bring these different opinions together. 'When we talk about animal welfare, it's a matter of frames. Your norms and values, and your relationship with animals colour your ideas about welfare. CenSAS is not just about animal welfare. It is broader than that: it is about all aspects of our relationship with animals. What different views are there? Where do they conflict? It's important to get that on the table before you can move on.'

Hellebrekers thinks it is important that all parties in this kind of dialogue get the same respect and right to speak. 'This is not just about academic arguments. They won't do away with the general public's concerns. Quite the opposite, in fact.'

Meijboom: 'In the end what we need is to find sustainable

solutions for relating to animals ethically. Not just applying sticking plasters, but looking for future-proof solutions. And we need to consider economic and veterinary interests, as well as the moral, political and emotional aspects. In the final analysis, both humans and animals stand to benefit.' 📍

YOUNG ANIMAL PROFESSIONALS

Besides public dialogue, CenSAS focuses on training programmes for future animal professionals such as vets and animal scientists. 'These young professionals will end up working in a society that expects them to take a position on issues such as the future of livestock or animal experiments,' says director Ludo Hellebrekers. 'That calls for training programmes that pay attention to the social dimension and not just to technical skills.'