

DEER WELFARE : A PERSPECTIVE

D.K. Blackmore, Palmerston North



Introduction

Before attempting to discuss the welfare of deer in New Zealand, a few definitions are required. The Shorter Oxford dictionary (Onions, 1987) describes welfare as the "state of being well, of happiness or well being". The phrase "being well" equates with health and freedom from disease. The words "happiness" and "well being" are emotive and anthropomorphic and presumably mean freedom from stress and the ability to exhibit normal behaviour.

As veterinary knowledge of farmed deer has increased, the majority of farmed deer can be described as "being well". It would also appear that most deer seen in a paddock are exhibiting few, if any, signs of stress and are able to exhibit normal behaviour.

The main events in the life of a farmed deer which might not be conducive to their overall welfare, are restraint and handling and certain routine surgical procedures such as the removal of antlers when in velvet. It is believed most people accept surgical procedures as acceptable, providing they are seen to be humane. This leads to the second definition which is particularly important in relation to velveting. The Shorter Oxford (Onions, 1987) definition of the word humane is "behaviour towards others which befits man". Thus if we are considering humane behaviour towards animals, it must befit the expectations of the society to which we belong. In a highly religious society acceptable behaviour is easily determined by the interpretation of the scriptures by senior ecclesiastical officials. A present day example of such a religious society is seen in Iran in relation to the fundamental Muslim faith. The religious slaughter of animals by both Muslims and strict Jews is dictated by the interpretation of religious writings irrelevant of any modern physiological knowledge of the effect of the process on the sensibility of the animal. As has been said elsewhere (Blackmore and Delany, 1988), from a Jewish standpoint it would be inhumane (behaviour unbefitting to a strict Jewish society) to stun an animal before slaughter.

In a predominantly secular society such as New Zealand, that which will be considered humane will be based on the knowledge, education and prejudices of that society at the time the matter is considered. It is likely that some time later, these opinions will be incorporated into legislation.

In a democracy, which New Zealand purports to be, attempts are meant to be made to determine public opinion before legislation is enacted. In relation to animal welfare, such probes of public opinion prior to legislation must be to determine what is considered humane. The Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC), of which the author is the chairman, is the body which advises the Minister of Agriculture on matters relating to animal welfare and that which may be considered humane. This committee already has the velvetting of deer on its agenda. This paper will attempt first to briefly review the role and progress of Government appointed animal welfare advisory committees in the United Kingdom and Australia. It will then describe the terms of reference, composition and short history of AWAC in New Zealand. The final part of the contribution will be very much the personal views of the author in relation to the velvetting of deer in New Zealand and factors which may influence society's determination of whether or not the procedure is humane.

The United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWAC) is the official committee which advises Government on matters of animal welfare. Its history can be traced back to the book "Animal Machines" by Ruth Harrison which was first published in 1964. This book was a major stimulus for the establishment in 1965 of the Government's Technical Committee to enquire into the welfare of animals kept under intensive systems (now commonly termed the Brambell Report). As the result of recommendations of this committee, in 1967 the Farm Animal Welfare Committee was

formed with legislative powers to produce codes of welfare. These codes must subsequently be approved by Parliament. In 1979 the present Farm Animals Welfare Council (FAWAC) was established under the chairmanship of Prof. Sir Richard Harris, and more recently Prof. Colin Spedding. Neither of these gentlemen are veterinarians and are an anatomist and agriculturalist respectively. FAWAC is described as an independent body to keep under review the welfare of farm animals on agricultural land, at markets, in transit and at the place of slaughter, and to advise agricultural ministers of any legislation or other changes it considers necessary.

Thus, FAWAC terms of reference are concerned only with the welfare of farm animals. It also produces periodic extensive reports on its considerations, whether or not they have been adopted by government. Its findings are extensively reported in the Veterinary Record where it seems to meet general veterinary professional approval. FAWAC would have appeared to have developed into a well accepted and influential body, likely to remain in existence for the foreseeable future.

Australia

In Australia, on a federal basis, the Australian Bureau of Animal Health established in 1980 the Subcommittee on Animal Welfare (SCAW). This is essentially a technical committee with one important function being the production of codes of welfare.

In 1983, the Senate Select Committee on Animal Welfare was convened. Its terms of reference were: "the question of animal welfare in Australia with particular reference to interstate and overseas commerce in animals, wildlife protection and harvesting; animal experimentation; codes of practice of animal husbandry for all species, the use of animals in sport". This was an important committee and such senate select committees are not established lightly.

Subsequently, two further federal standing committees have been established; the Joint Animal Welfare Council (JAWAC) and the National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare (NCCAW). The former committee (JAWAC) is "primarily a forum to encourage a harmonised approach to animal welfare at the implementation level" (Anon, 1990). The second committee (NCCAW) is to directly advise the Minister for Primary Industry and Energy on matters of animal welfare on issues which are, or could become of national significance. This committee, which first met in November 1989, has similar terms of reference to FAWAC in the UK and AWAC in New Zealand. The majority of the states in Australia have now established animal welfare advisory committees of varying types.

The Animal Welfare Advisory Committee in New Zealand

The Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC) was established by the Minister of Agriculture in September 1989. The committee's terms of reference were broadly to advise the Minister of Agriculture on all matters relating to the welfare of animals other than those which fall within the jurisdiction of the National Animal Ethics Committee (NAEAC). This latter committee is essentially concerned with the use of animals for teaching and research. AWAC's specific terms of reference are

1. To review the Animal Protection Act and advise the Minister on any changes required.
2. To develop codes of minimum standards for the welfare of particular classes of animals and review existing codes.
3. To recommend specific areas where research into animal welfare matters is required.

All these specific aims are of significance in relation to the removal of velvet in deer.

The committee consists of a secretary who is a permanent member of staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF). All other members are appointed by the Minister although the majority represent specific organisations.

The chairman is considered independent and at present is a veterinarian (Prof. D K. Blackmore). Other members consist of the chairman of NAEAC (Prof. E D Fielden), Ms A. Hall representing Save Animals from Exploitation (Inc) (SAFE), Dr J. Hellstrom representing MAF but normally Mr D. Bayvil is his representative, Mr C.F J Parkin, a philosopher from Victoria University, Mr B A Pauling representing the NZVA, Mr D.A. Petersen representing Federated Farmers of N.Z. (Inc) and Mr N E Wells representing the Royal N.Z Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals

The Committee is able, and has already, established *ad hoc* technical committees to advise on specific topics. Only the independent chairmen receive a fee for attending meetings, but now all members of the committee are able to claim expenses.

The committee first met on 28 November 1989, and has since met on three further occasions. It also established an advisory technical committee to advise on the welfare of poultry kept in cages for egg production. The major activities of the committee include suggestions for the amendments to the Animals Protection Act which should result in a new draft proposal open to public comment before the end of the year. Definite recommendations have been made related to both the slaughter of poultry and minimum cage sizes for laying birds. The other major activity relates to the production or amendment of codes of welfare of animals. Of particular interest to those involved with deer is the proposal to produce a code relating to the velveting of deer. A subcommittee will be established to advise AWAC on this matter in the near future.

As AWAC has been in existence for less than a year it is difficult to assess its potential. However, the Chairman believes it is likely to have a major impact on animal welfare and will gain general credibility from most sectors of the community.

If the committee is unable to achieve this general credibility it will be unable to advise the Minister as to what is humane. Also one hopes that a politician will accept advice based on a general consensus of informed opinion. The committee's advice to the Minister on changes to the Animal Protection Act and preparation of a code related to the removal of antlers from deer may well be the "making or breaking" of the committee.

The question of antler removal

So far this contribution has been relatively factual and consistent with the view of an independent Chairman of AWAC. The following comments are the personal views of the author and are in no way the official view of the committee but will, no doubt, include several points which may be considered by the committee.

The author has for the whole of his life from early school days had an intense interest in animals and a concern for animal welfare. In his professional life he has been deeply involved with animal experimentation and indeed involved with procedures which were disturbing to him. Such experiments included work on insecticide toxicity and the slaughter of stock. However, he firmly believes the ends justified the means, and the general welfare of both wildlife and domestic stock benefited from the increased knowledge which accrued. This type of knowledge helps society to define what is humane. Arising from increased experience and age, the author believes that one must become somewhat of a pragmatist to become an effective animal welfarist.

All the ethical and technical aspects of velvet harvesting in deer, have been most elegantly discussed by Dr Wilson only a year ago (Wilson, 1989). Anyone concerned with the topic should re-read this paper closely.

It is believed the following points made by Dr Wilson are particularly important:

1. The present Animals Protection Act does not refer to the removal of antlers, but only dehorning
2. Under dehorning, anaesthesia is only required for animals over the age of 20 months.

3. Knowledge is lacking on whether or not, there is pain and distress inflicted on an animal after the effects of the local anaesthetic have worn off
4. The UK, a major trading partner of New Zealand, has banned the procedure.

In relation to the Animals Protection Act it is obviously illogical and confusing to consider dehorning of cattle and velveting of deer to be synonymous. These two procedures must be separate issues. It would also seem to be inhumane to allow dehorning or develveting of animals of up to 20 months of age without some form of anaesthetic. Even a pragmatic approach cannot be used to justify the presumed infliction of so much distress to an animal. The issue of who should administer such an anaesthetic is a different issue. Although the author has not removed antlers from a deer, it is difficult to conceive the procedure not being performed under veterinary supervision.

The third issue raised was that of the degree of pain which might be inflicted on an animal after the effects of a local anaesthetic had worn off. It is believed information on this topic in both deer and cattle should be available to anyone attempting to reach a decision on policies relating to velveting.

The first point raised, concerning the banning of velveting in the UK, is a political rather than a scientific issue. It should be remembered that the stunning of sheep in New Zealand before slaughter, was as a direct result of pressure from the UK. Although the slaughter of sheep in the UK is often far from humane (Gregory and Wotton, 1984), this pressure from the UK had a significant effect on legislation in New Zealand and the welfare of sheep in this country. The issue of velveting in deer is very different. Reference to the article by Wilson (1989) shows that FAWAC did not have the knowledge and experience that we have in New Zealand. However, the Government will no doubt bear in mind these political issues when finally reaching a decision, hopefully based at least partially on the views of AWAC.

In summary, the author believes that the velveting of deer should be considered an acceptable and humane procedure providing the following criteria are satisfied:

1. The handling and restraint of the animals causes no more stress than other commonly employed procedures to which deer are subjected such as tuberculin testing, vaccination, etc.
2. The animals are anaesthetised in such a manner which prevents pain at the time the antlers are removed, and that subsequent analgesics are administered if shown to be necessary.

It is not believed that the removal of velvet for financial reward is of direct relevance in determining whether or not the procedure is humane, in an agricultural based society such as New Zealand.

References

- Anon (1990): Report of Minister's address to first national consultative committee meeting ACCART News 2: 1-2
- Blackmore, D.K. and Delany, M.W. (1988): Slaughter of Stock. Publication No. 118, Centre for Veterinary Continuing Education, Massey University, Palmerston North
- Gregory, N.G. and Wotton, S.G. (1984) Sheep slaughtering procedures. I Survey of abattoir practice British Veterinary Journal 140: 281-286.
- Onions, C.T. (1987): The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Charendon Press, Oxford
- Wilson, P.R. (1989): Velvet harvesting; moral, ethical and legal aspects. Proceedings of a Deer Course for Veterinarians, No. 6 NZVA Deer Branch, pp 104-117.