

## CURRENT ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUES IN NZ

L R Matthews

Animal Behaviour and Welfare Research Centre  
Ruakura Agricultural Centre  
Private Bag, Hamilton

### INTRODUCTION

The way animals are farmed is having an increasing influence on the saleability of animal products on both local and international markets. The preference in Europe for "clean, green" products has meant that meat from animals administered growth hormones cannot be exported to that market. Similarly, there is increasing consumer preference for "welfare-friendly" products, ie products derived from animals that have been farmed in the most humane way possible. Hence, the expression "clean, green and kind" to describe the most marketable goods.

In the recent past, the main welfare concern arose from farming practices in the intensive pig, poultry and veal industries and from slaughtering practices.

As a direct result of this concern there have been several changes in Animal Protection Legislation in NZ and overseas to improve the welfare of animals (eg requirement for the stunning of animals prior to slaughter and increased minimum space allowances for battery hens).

Increasing pressure is now being applied to the more traditional outdoor farming routines (eg transport, surgical operations) carried out on cattle, sheep and deer. Although these practices may once have been deemed acceptable, changing attitudes and new knowledge have required a reassessment of their suitability according to current welfare standards.

### WHAT IS ANIMAL WELFARE?

Animal welfare refers to the standard of care and concern for animals when they are used by humans in farming, research or recreational activities. We need to consider animal welfare as animals have the capacity to experience pain and/or suffering.

Welfare is regarded as ideal when both the physical and behavioural needs of animals have been met, that is, when animals are free from:

- hunger and thirst;
- physical discomfort and pain;

- injury and disease;
- fear and distress; and
- are free to show important behaviours (such as social contact with other animals) and to exercise (World Veterinary Association 1989).

Any use of animals by humans has the potential to cause pain or stress and therefore to reduce the level of welfare. If a practice is thought to adversely affect welfare, then the use of the procedure has to be weighed against the benefits derived. In general, unduly painful, stressful or damaging routines should be avoided. In certain cases, the use of such procedures may be justified where the distress is brief or minimised and there are resulting benefits. These benefits fall into three categories and are listed in order of importance (to the animal):

- Benefits to the animal or others in its group. An example is removing antler velvet from stags. While some aspects of this procedure are stressful (Matthews & Cook, 1991), the animals benefit from the reduced risk of damage if transported in the velvet season, or the reduced risk of injuring others during the rut.
- Benefits to human safety and welfare. For instance, vaccination procedures result in some discomfort to animals but benefit humans by reducing the transmission of disease to animal handlers and consumers.
- Benefits to humans in terms of ease of animal management and farm profitability. Most animal handling procedures fall into this category and include such diverse practices as restraint, castration, transport and embryo transfer. All of these cause some pain or distress or place restrictions on behaviour and benefit the farmer but not the animal.

The acceptability of various handling practices depends on the balance between the amount of pain, stress or behavioural deprivation experienced by the animal and the magnitude of the subsequent benefits to animals and humans.

## **ANIMAL WELFARE - THE CONTROVERSY**

### **Animal Welfare and Animal Rights**

Animal welfare is controversial because of a lack of agreement between different sector groups on the appropriate trade-off between animal pain/distress arising from a particular practice and the benefits derived.

In the extreme case, *animal rights* supporters (a minority group) argue that it is not appropriate to impose any costs (in terms of pain/distress) on an animal. Thus, animal rightists claim that there is no justification for any animal use and seek to abolish the use of animals in farming, research, sport, hunting and trapping (Regan, 1983; Singer, 1985).

Supporters of *animal welfare* organisations, while acknowledging the acceptability of human use of animals, are more likely to give greater weight to animal costs and benefits than to human benefits when determining the desirability of various practices. Alternatively, some groups who depend on animals for their livelihood (eg farmers, researchers) may give more emphasis to the benefits of animal use to humans.

The issue is further complicated by differences between countries in standards of care and attitudes towards animals. The high degree of confinement in many European animal production systems has contributed to the much greater public concern for the welfare of farm animals in those countries in comparison with New Zealand. This has resulted in a strong call for a return to more extensive farming operations, similar to those practised in New Zealand. While this might seem an advantage for NZ in terms of international acceptance of our practices and products, there is a potential downside. Because of the heightened awareness of welfare issues and the increasing "extensification" of farming systems in Europe there is increasing scrutiny of the welfare of animals in outdoor systems. The perceived welfare benefits of some of our traditional "outdoor" practices may be deemed unacceptable. For example, there is increasing unease in the UK with the so-called NZ-style easy-care lambing system, where there is little supervision of parturient ewes. The Farm Animal Welfare Council (UK) has initiated a review of this and other sheep management practices in outdoor systems, including feeding levels, degree of shepherding and supervision, marketing, and transport. In addition, the current practice in the UK of capturing wild red deer in Scotland and immediately trucking them long distances to the south, following by intensive housing, has resulted in deaths and trauma to a proportion of the animals. The welfare image of the deer industry there has been adversely affected and public attention is focusing increasingly on it. If particular practices were found to be unacceptable and they were similar to those in this country than it might be necessary to adopt alternative procedures to maintain the welfare-friendly image of our products.

### **Trade Barriers**

As countries in Europe raise their standards of animal welfare, the cost of production often rises. For example, the proposal to ban tethering of sows in Europe will increase the space requirements and capital cost of pig farming. Countries with higher standards and costs do not wish to disadvantage their own producers. This leads to pressure being exerted on competitor countries to increase their welfare standards. Failure to do so could result in the closing of access to markets (non-tariff trade barriers).

### **WELFARE - THE ISSUES**

Issues associated with traditional sheep and cattle farming (such as humane slaughter) also have an impact on the deer industry. However, a number of factors unique to deer farming cause heightened attention and welfare concern. The public have a particularly strong empathy with deer. This results from their extensive characterisation in children's stories and their nobility status on hunting estates. In addition, deer are viewed as wild animals with a range of behavioural features (eg agile, aggressive) not well-suited to the close handling required in farming operations. Lastly, the deer farming industry is

relatively new and the public may perceive that it can be more easily influenced than traditional industries.

Harvesting of velvet is a particularly contentious issue. It is banned by law in the UK on welfare grounds even though no scientific experiments had been undertaken at that time to determine the relative advantages and disadvantages for animals and humans. Velvet harvesting exposes stags to a range of potentially stressful practices, including mustering from pasture, yarding, drafting, restraint and removal of sensitive tissue. Recent studies at Ruakura (Matthews & Cook, 1991) have shown that stags experience some stress in the general handling process, but there does not appear to be any additional stress due to the administration of analgesic or velvet removal. This research also showed that velvet harvesting under local anaesthesia is less stressful than the insertion of an ear tag.

On balance, the benefits of velvet removal to the animal (outlined earlier) and humans (eg safety and farm income) seem to outweigh any short-term welfare costs (ie stress) to the animal.

The transport-slaughter process is controversial with all farmed species because of the wide range of stressful events that animals are exposed to, and because of the emotiveness of the death process. With deer, stress is associated with herding and trucking (Smith & Dobson, 1990), confinement in unfamiliar surroundings (Kay et al, 1981) and with bruising and other trauma received en route to slaughter (Selwyn & Hathaway, 1990). During the immediate pre-slaughter period the duration of time in the lairage area, the availability of food and water, the ease of movement to the lairage and stunning areas, type of head restraint at stunning and stunning procedure are all topical welfare issues (FAWC, 1984). Because animals derive no benefit from the slaughtering process, its continued public acceptance of this practice will depend on reducing the welfare costs to the lowest level possible. Research on cattle has shown that altering loading and unloading facilities to improve animal flow, avoiding over or under crowding and the mixing of unfamiliar or horned animals, and reducing the use of electric goads leads to improvements in animal welfare (Eldridge, et al 1986, 1989). Similar research is necessary with deer. Video marketing of animals could also lead to improved welfare by reducing the need for handling and transport of animals.

Other practices which have no obvious benefit to the animal but which cause some degree of stress, pain or behavioural deprivation will become increasingly difficult to justify to consumers. To illustrate, castration of pigs is now viewed as unacceptable in Europe as it is possible using appropriate management to raise male pigs to slaughter weight without any "boar taint" of the meat.

Thus, potentially controversial deer farming practices include electroejaculation, confinement of animals in barren paddocks without shade or shelter, and handling or restraining facilities or procedures that lead to unnecessary excitement or stress. Systems that allow animals to express their natural behavioural tendencies (eg to seek seclusion in response to disturbance (Hermann, 1991)) or the use of analgesics to reduce pain will assist public acceptance of routine farming practices.

Reproductive manipulations that lead to increased calving difficulties or caesarian sections (eg from the use of large breed sires across small dams) are unacceptable. Electro-immobilisation as a restraining technique has been banned in the UK and other European countries. Its use here would harm the welfare image of NZ farming practices.

## **WELFARE - THE OPPORTUNITIES**

Due to the high levels of animal care and the keeping of animals outdoors year round, NZ farming systems and farm products generally enjoy a positive welfare image on overseas markets.

Maintaining and improving standards of welfare benefits not only the animals but also farmers and exporters, through enhancing productivity and improving international market access.

One of the most controversial handling procedures, ie transport to slaughter, coincidentally provides some of the best opportunities for enhancing productivity and welfare. High levels of stress prior to slaughter can increase the incidence of low quality meat (eg dark-cutting beef and pale-soft-exudative meat in pigs) and decrease the shelf-life of chilled products (Fabiansson, et al, 1988; Hails, 1978). In addition, bruising and other trauma leads to loss of carcass yield and quality, as well as increasing processing costs where trimming is required.

The EC is currently proposing new slaughter regulations for member states which should assist in reducing stress (EEC, 1991). The regulations are to ensure that animals are

"spared any avoidable excitement, pain or suffering during movement, lairage, restraint, stunning, slaughter or killing".

The main features include:

- Appropriate training and certification of the competence of animal handlers;
- Separation of animals that are aggressive to each other;
- Use of loading and unloading ramps with a minimum possible incline (less than 20° for exit ramps for calves and pigs);
- Restricting the use of electric goads to cattle and pigs and then only if they refuse to move where there is clear space ahead, and for no more than two seconds duration at a time;
- Restraint of all animals to facilitate slaughter. In particular, the movement of the head of cattle is to be restricted before slaughter.

While these regulations are designed specifically for the handling of cattle, sheep, pigs and goats it can be assumed that similar standards will be required for deer.

Fortunately, NZ practices are similar to those proposed for the EC member states and slaughterhouses here should not have too much difficulty in applying similar standards of welfare. However, we should continue to improve market opportunities and welfare by developing alternative procedures or by using techniques that minimise stress, pain and physical injury in all aspects of farming operations. Further research and the application of existing knowledge of animal behaviour in the design of races, yards and lairages and restraining techniques will further improve welfare and product quality (Kilgour & Dalton, 1984).

The proposed new Animal Welfare Act and new Codes or Recommendations and Minimum Welfare Standards for various farm animal species and practices (eg use of anaesthetics for removal of velvet antler from animals of all ages) will assist in maintaining welfare-friendly farming systems.

Attitudes to animal welfare both in NZ and internationally will continue to evolve. These changes need to be monitored so that:

- Handling practices can be reassessed in the light of new attitudes or knowledge;
- Public education campaigns can be undertaken where the proven welfare benefits (or relative harmlessness) or certain practices are not widely recognised. In addition, we need to be pro-active in adopting improved animal handling techniques. In this way market opportunities for welfare-friendly products from NZ can be expanded.

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