RATING THE RELATIVE AVERSIVENESS OF HANDLING TREATMENTS FOR FARMED RED DEER

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In the interests of animal welfare and efficient production it is important that there are effective ways of assessing how aversive existing and potential management techniques are to farmed animals. In the present study, methods of rating the relative aversiveness of different handling treatments used for red deer were investigated.

Twenty-four yearling red deer stags were randomly allocated to receive two of the following three treatments: no handling, restraint in a crush, and restraint in a crush with one antler removed under local anaesthesia. The two treatments were administered in two different pens, in standard indoor deer handling yards. Over a three-day period, the deer experienced both of their treatments twice, each time receiving the same treatment in the same pen. Following this they were given a choice between entering either of the pens where the treatments were carried out. This choice test was carried out three times. The deer showed a strong preference for one of the pens, choosing it in 85% of the tests (this may have been because it was closest to the main entrance of the yards), and no effects of the treatments on the pen chosen were found. In an attempt to overcome the problem of a strong preference for a particular pen, two further studies were carried out in a different test area, using 11 deer chosen randomly from the original group of 24 stags. These deer received two treatments: no handling (NH), and isolation from the rest of the deer in the presence of a human (IS). For one group of six deer, individuals were run repeatedly through a pen, receiving one of the treatments each time. The walls of the pen were coloured black when one of the treatments was to be administered, and white when the other treatment was to be administered. The time taken for each deer to enter the pen was recorded. The deer were treated 30 times over a four-day period, and no effect of the colour of the walls on the latency to enter the pen was found, e.g., the deer did not take more time to enter when the wall colour indicated the IS treatment. In a further study, individuals from another group of five deer were given a choice between entering a left-hand or right-hand pen, and received either Treatment NH or IS, depending on the pen entered. In 21 choice tests, the percentage of deer choosing to enter the pen where they were not handled rose from 46% to 77% and 100% for the first, second and third group of seven choice tests respectively.

The third part of the study indicated that red deer are capable of associating a pen with a particular treatment. It may be possible to teach a group of deer the testing procedure, so that preferences are established in very few trials. This would allow comparisons between treatments which cannot be administered repeatedly, for instance different methods of antler removal could be compared.