

3E: ETHICS AND ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

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The drive for increased productivity and efficiency

The way in which we treat our food animals has changed considerably in the last 50 or so years, and this is at the root of the shift in public opinion. Historically, the basis of good welfare was good animal husbandry. That meant keeping animals under conditions to which they were biologically adapted whilst providing additional food and shelter and protection from predators. Producers were generally small scale and labour-intensive, with animals treated as individuals with an associated high value to the producer. High standards of welfare and high rates of food production went hand-in-hand since when the animals thrived, the producer thrived. This is not to say that no animals suffered – but the general maxim applied that, as a producer, ‘if you took care of the animals they would take care of you’.

But, following the advent of intensive, high technology agricultural systems, the relationship between good welfare and production broke down. As production systems became large-scale, animals were no longer treated as individuals and their value to the producer consequently diminished. Intensive farming methods involve removing animals from their ‘natural’ environment, altering their normal social structures and behaviours, and raising them in increasingly large numbers in controlled conditions with the help of hormones, antibiotics and vaccines. As one ethical commentator puts it “We can now put square pegs in round holes, round pegs in square holes, and still generate successful production and profit”¹. The emphasis is on productivity and efficiency rather than on good animal husbandry.

The major benefit from this for the consumer is the availability of animal products at increasingly lower prices. Thus food which 50 years ago was considered luxury, is now affordable for most people. However, the price for this development has been paid by the animals. Animals can and do suffer as a result of intensive farming methods due, for example, to the restricted and unnatural environments they are housed in, or as a result of production related diseases which are the outcomes of selecting animals for specific traits such as fast growth or high milk yield.

The classic example of this shift in food production methodology is the layer hen. Until the 1950s, the majority of layer hens were housed in some form of free range environment, with an indoor shelter with nesting areas and outdoor access. There were seen to be two main problems with this situation which affected egg production – disease and climate. Egg production is greatly affected by changes in temperature, so allowing hens to range outdoors limited their productivity. In order to maximise productivity hens were put into more controlled conditions indoors. To reduce disease transmission they were separated from their droppings by placing them in wire cages and given food and water in delivery systems that minimised any contamination. The more hens that could be fitted into a cage, the more economically efficient the system would be. Producers soon discovered that hens will still lay eggs at close to the highest possible rate (one every day for the first year of their lives) even when they are crowded into a space which does not allow them to stand erect or turn around without difficulty.

Shifting public opinion

The first evidence of a public reaction to such changes in agricultural practices came from the United Kingdom (UK) where, in 1965, the UK government published a landmark report into the welfare of animals kept under intensive livestock husbandry systems, the Brambell Report². The Brambell Committee was established to assess the evidence that confinement of farm animals causes undue suffering. The report concluded that “an animal should at least have sufficient freedom of movement to be able without difficulty, to turn around, groom itself, get up, lie down and stretch its limbs.” The Brambell Report also concluded that the welfare of an animal includes its physical and mental state and that any animal kept by humans must, at least, be protected from unnecessary suffering.

The five freedoms

The Brambell Committee introduced the concept of the ‘five freedoms’ for animals (Table 1) – a set of principles which provide a logical and comprehensive framework for analysis of welfare within any animal production system. The five freedoms have been promoted by the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council for many years, and have been adopted by many animal welfare organisations, including RSPCA Australia, as the basis for their policies on the treatment of food animals and other livestock.

Table 1 The five freedoms for animals

<i>1. Freedom from hunger and thirst</i> - by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour
<i>2. Freedom from discomfort</i> - by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area
<i>3. Freedom from pain, injury or disease</i> - by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment
<i>4. Freedom to express normal behaviour</i> - by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind
<i>5. Freedom from fear and distress</i> - by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

Consumer demand

The growth of intensive farming practices produced a shift from the public perception of farmers as caring for animals to a more negative view of animal exploitation. However, whilst the Brambell Report stands out as a landmark in the debate over the treatment of food animals, it is only in recent years (since the mid 1990s) that the shift in public opinion has brought about any tangible changes in industry practice.

It is generally acknowledged that public concern over the welfare of farm animals in Australia is rising and that there is increasing consumer demand for transparency in the food production industry. Surveys from other countries indicate that the proportion of consumers whose buying habits are influenced by animal welfare issues is rising. In the USA, a 1999 survey by the Animal Industry Foundation found that 44 percent of consumers were willing to pay up to five percent more for meat and poultry products labelled as coming from humanely raised animals³. In a 1997 "Trends in Canada Survey", conducted for the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors, 37% of consumers cited ethical concerns around treatment of animals as a factor influencing their purchases⁴.

Australian consumers are also becoming increasingly sophisticated in their food buying habits and expect to be able to make informed choices based on a number of aspects of food production. These include the use of genetically modified foods, the use of chemicals, and also the way in which food animals are reared. These changes in the way the public views the treatment of farm animals indicate how important it has become for producers and policy makers to seriously consider animal welfare in their decision making processes.

For example, a 1994 survey of the attitudes of Australians to battery hen egg production found that 66% of those surveyed believed battery cages were unacceptable. Reasons for this view were that hens were too cramped, that the cages are too small, that the system is cruel or inhumane, and that hens should have freedom to move around and need space to exercise⁵. A similar survey carried out in 1998 found that 81% of respondents would be prepared to pay more for their eggs if a ban on battery cages was introduced⁶.

Food Production Accreditation Schemes

One result of the reaction against the welfare problems of intensive farming systems has been the development of food production accreditation schemes which set their own high standards of animal welfare. Producers had already begun capitalising on the consumer demand for 'animal friendly' products (free range eggs is the obvious example) but there were few, if any, standards in place to ensure that what was being sold as a high welfare product actually represented high welfare standards. What was needed was the introduction of an accreditation system which could be endorsed by an established animal welfare organisation so that the public could have some assurance of the standards that the system upheld.

The first animal welfare based food accreditation scheme was introduced in 1994 by the UK RSPCA under the title 'Freedom Food'. Freedom Food Ltd is an independent, non-profit making organisation set up with the aim of improving farm animal welfare in the UK by providing labelled products which represent high standards of animal welfare. The basis of the Freedom Food standards are the 'five freedoms'. However these have been expanded to provide detailed and precise documents setting out the standards for each of the food animal species so far covered by the scheme.

Freedom Food's welfare standards are written by the UK RSPCA's farm animal specialists in consultation with veterinary surgeons, farm animal experts and producers. The standards are based on the needs of the animals and are written around scientific research and practical farming experience. The standards cover the animal on the farm, transport from the farm and slaughter. Farmers, transporters, processors or abattoirs must meet all the RSPCA standards before they can be accredited and become members of the scheme. Accredited producers are able to label their products with the Freedom Food logo which provides the consumer with an assurance that the product has come from animals reared, transported and slaughtered in accordance with RSPCA standards. However, farmers cannot use the Freedom Food label on their products until they have linked up with other accredited members throughout the whole supply chain. So far, welfare standards have been written for the following species: sheep, chickens, turkeys, laying hens, ducks, beef cattle, dairy cattle and pigs (Table 2).

Table 2 Progress of the UK Freedom Food scheme⁷

	Launch July 1994	August 2001
Scheme members (farms, hauliers, abattoirs)	119	Over 3,000
Retailers stocking Freedom Food products	400	Over 6,000
Animals in the scheme	one million	approx. 19 million
Egg sales per month	100,000	82 million
Total number of animals since 1994		111 million

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RSPCA Australia's accreditation scheme

In Australia, the RSPCA has set up a similar accreditation to the Freedom Food scheme in the UK. Again, the scheme is based on the 'five freedoms'. So far the only food production system that has been accredited is for eggs. The RSPCA Australia Certification Standards for Eggs require that, amongst other things, layer hens must have litter in which to dust bath, space to flap wings, stretch and socialise, nests in which to lay their eggs and adequate perch space.

RSPCA Australia is currently developing standards for the housing and husbandry of pigs which will allow the accreditation of pig meat products in the near future.

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Schemes in other countries

The American Humane Association (AHA) has introduced animal welfare guidelines for producers to market dairy, beef, or poultry products with a certification from the AHA under their 'Free Farmed' label. Again, the AHA's scheme is based on the five freedoms and is intended to advance market-driven improvements in animal welfare standards throughout the food animal industry. Similar schemes have also been set up in Canada and New Zealand.

Have these schemes had an impact on farm animal practices?

As well as providing consumers with a choice of product with high animal welfare standards, the various accreditation schemes discussed above also have the long-term aim of encouraging producers to convert to the scheme or to adopt high welfare standards of their own. The overall aim is to phase out production methods that do not satisfy the five freedoms.

The success of the UK Freedom Foods scheme, which has involved 111 million animals (see Table 2) indicates that, at least in the UK, there is some progress being made towards this goal. However there are other issues connected with food production in the public's mind which can act against improving animal welfare in the food industry.

Public reactions to food health scares and disease outbreaks in food animals have prompted producers to give assurances to the public over the health and hygiene of their livestock, products and processes. The cost of this may be high. For example, a requirement to produce stock uncontaminated by organisms such as salmonella (which may contaminate livestock without causing them any illness) will tend to drive producers towards controlled environment systems and away from outdoor systems.

Furthermore, allowing market forces, rather than legislation, to determine animal welfare standards will never protect the welfare of all food animals. There will always be some consumers who are unconcerned with animal welfare or who place welfare concerns below price constraints. Because of the financial temptations to disregard animal welfare, strict government controls will always be necessary to deter inhumane treatment of farm animals.

The solution to these problems is to take a holistic approach to food production that incorporates food safety, animal welfare and environmental issues and to ensure that the principles enshrined in the 'five freedoms' are adopted as our social consensus ethic.

Discussion notes

- The UK Freedom Foods Scheme does not give exact requirements for the eligibility of food producers wanting to participate in the scheme. As with many ethical issues there seem to be no exact rules, just the ideal ethical situations quoted.
- The Freedom Food standards designed for Australia are very exact in their requirements. The full range of standards for each type of animal are not available on the web, but interested producers would receive a copy on application for accreditation. The producer would have to satisfy the RSPCA that they comply with these standards in every way, and, where relevant, that they are able to link up with a transporter and abattoir that also comply, before they would be accepted into the scheme.
- Freedom foods have developed the following standards at this stage:

Welfare Standards for Beef Cattle
Welfare Standards for Chickens
Welfare Standards for Dairy Cattle
Welfare Standards for Ducks
Welfare Standards at Hatcheries
Welfare Standards for Laying Hens and Pullets
Welfare Standards for Pigs
Welfare Standards for Sheep
Welfare Standards for Turkeys

As an example, the standards for beef cattle are contained in a 46-page document which has sections on food and water, environment, health, transport and slaughter. Each section sets out detailed requirements which cover every important aspect of the husbandry of these animals. To accompany the standards, the RSPCA has also developed guidance notes for the detailed veterinary health plan that must be put into place on every accredited farm. (Print copies of these documents may be consulted in the RSPCA Australia library in Canberra; unfortunately electronic copies are not yet available).

References

- 1 Rollin BE (1993) Animal production and the new social ethic for animals. Food Animal Wellbeing 1993 Conference Proceedings and Deliberations. USDA and Purdue University Office of Agricultural Research Programs, Indiana USA. http://www.ansc.purdue.edu/wellbeing/FAWB1993/Food_Animal_Well_Being.html
- 2 Brambell FWR (1965) *Report of the Technical Committee to Enquire into the Welfare of Animals kept under Intensive Livestock Husbandry Systems*. HMSO, London
- 3 Data from American Humane Association website <http://www.freefarmed.org/faq.htm>
- 4 Data from British Columbia SPCA website <http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/farm/>
- 5 AGB McNair (1994) *Battery Hen Survey*. Prepared for Animal Liberation Victoria
- 6 People Data (1998) Examining Attitudes to the Battery Caging of Hens, Understanding of Current Egg Carton Labelling, and Egg Buying Habits and Intentions. Survey conducted on behalf of Animals Australia
- 7 Data from http://www.rspca.org.uk/content/freedom_food.html