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Taking Account of Animal Ethics and Welfare

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Taking Account of Animal Ethics and Welfare

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Abstract

Animal ethics and welfare, the model codes of practice for the welfare of animals and the bureaucracy which is necessary to make the codes work, are an indulgence of wealthy, developed countries.

In many developing countries the main concern of people is their day-to-day survival with little concern for long-term ecological implications or animal welfare issues. Unfortunately many aid programs have been a waste of money with many layers of expensive bureaucracy, and recently organisations have been forced to reconsider their position on the

livestock industries in developing countries.

Working with the farmers and their indigenous stock, progress can be made with seemingly simple strategies. Just the system of feeding poultry each day and confining them for part of the day and at night can produce more eggs and prevent predation. This means more money, better health for the livestock and the people. The concept of animal welfare could be built into this training with the emphasis on the benefits accruing to the people as well as to the animals.

Introduction

‘Animal ethics and welfare’ as used in the context of our developed animal production systems immediately conjures up animal welfare issues and the animal rights debate.

Ethics is defined in the Macquarie Dictionary as a system of moral principles by which human actions and proposals may be judged good or bad or right or wrong. The word moral pertains to or is concerned with the right conduct or the distinction between right or wrong.

Animal welfare relates to providing animals with adequate environments and management to meet their intrinsic and behavioural needs.

Animal rights is a belief system in which animals intrinsically have the same rights to life and liberty as humans. Singer (1977) in his book ‘Animal Liberation, Towards an End to Man’s Inhumanity to Animals’ initiated the questioning of man’s right to use animals and argued that humans were speci-

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exist — favouring ourselves at the expense of other species.

In this paper I will examine the views of developed countries on animal welfare and question the appropriateness of these views in developing countries where even human rights are often lacking.

The western concepts of animal welfare and rights

What are the animal welfare issues that concern many people, especially about intensive livestock production? Some of the issues are:

- The perception that animals are machines and that modern production systems are bad for the animal's welfare.
- That production animals are kept under inhumane conditions.
- That the animals are fed hormones, additives and other chemicals which adversely affect their well-being and may affect the safety of animal products to human health.
- That short-term profits are more important than animal welfare.
- That biotechnology advances are bad for the animals' welfare.

Various Model Codes of Practice have been developed for the welfare of most farmed animals, and for their transport and slaughter. All these efforts have created a huge bureaucracy devoted to collecting data, inspecting animal production systems, setting up animal ethics committees and regulating research.

Developed countries in which people have a reasonable standard of living can afford to support an animal welfare bureaucracy and have Model Codes of Practice. Are we going to impose our western animal welfare legislation on developing countries?

Humans as meat and plant eaters

Animal welfare has been tied up with animal rights and it is often argued that humans should not eat meat. If we look into the evolution of humans through examination of fossil remains, it seems that several species of ape-man appeared before humans, but came to a dead end.

The robust Australopithecines were one of these groups, and were called robust because of their

massive jaws supported by giant muscles. They were smaller than chimpanzees and had lost their canine teeth, the better to chew from side to side. They were probably dedicated vegetarians and became extinct. Our ancestors were larger animals with larger brains and used tools. They also ate meat, which provided the protein for their larger brains.

Gradually males and females became closer in size — the females gathered plant foods to share with the males, who were free to hunt for meat. The meat was shared with the women who now had access to a high protein diet. This sharing strategy cut down the risk of starvation on the dry African plains — when meat was scarce, plant foods (e.g. nuts, fruits) filled the gap, and when these were scarce, meat filled the gap. Humans now acquired a high-protein diet without developing an intense specialisation for hunting (see Ridley 1999).

Why is the brief comment about our ancestors important? It suggests that a combination of agricultural improvement and animal production may be one way, in suitable environments, to fight poverty.

Livestock production in developing countries

Fighting poverty has become one of the main issues in many developing countries. Humans derive many benefits from animal production. Animals provide meat, eggs, milk and, in some cultures, blood. Animal proteins generally have higher nutritional value than plant proteins, both in terms of amino acid composition and amount of other nutrients such as minerals and vitamins.

How are livestock used in developing countries?

In many societies, particularly nomadic ones, livestock are a major source of wealth. They are used for barter, exchanges with in-laws in marriage arrangements, and as a mobile store of food (milk, blood, meat).

In India cattle and buffalo are a major source of dung, which is used as fuel. The cattle and buffalo consume forage such as rice straw, and ditch-bank or roadside weeds, which are unsuitable as fuel for cooking fires, and convert them to dung. These resources are also used to support work and milk production. Although Western culture often maligns the sacred cattle of India as non-productive,

they are actually very important in resource utilisation (Cheek 1993).

Poultry and pigs contribute greatly to food security, employment, income and social stability in developing countries. Huque (2002) commented that the poultry industry has increased by 23% (in bird population) in developed countries, and by 76% in developing countries, in the last decade. This large increase was due to both family and commercial poultry farming. Poultry provide a major food source, cash income (especially from eggs), employment and a store of savings. Poor women can sell the eggs to create income and gain empowerment.

Village chickens and pigs do not compete with human needs. Pigs consume vegetation, roots, insects and food scraps; in China they are traditionally raised on aquatic weeds, waste vegetables, table scraps and kitchen waste. Chickens traditionally eat table scraps, kitchen waste and cull vegetables. Thus food production is increased using resources which otherwise would be wasted.

Duck production is of great importance in many wetland rice-growing regions in China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam (Farrell 2002). This is an area that Farrell (2002) sees as worthy of overseas funding. However, he cautions that the type of aid given is important. Introduced and improved livestock breeds often do not do as well as the village birds — which exist on scavenging — and village households cannot afford to keep or feed them. This could be a welfare problem of our creating.

Agroforestry

Many third world countries have high inflation rates and a desperate need to earn foreign exchange to provide people with amenities. Central American countries have few resources other than their forests and agriculture, so large areas have been cleared for export crops of coffee, cacao, bananas and beef. This has created a major ecological crisis (Cheek 1993), although such activity was promoted by development agencies until recently. However, agroforestry is becoming increasingly common in tropical developing countries, and livestock are an important component of agroforestry systems.

Optimal resource utilisation involves the integration of crop and animal production. This also optimises the utilisation of human resources; looking after the land is likely to be more important when

crops are also produced. Children raised on farms are often responsible for the livestock, so they learn invaluable lessons on life, death and responsibility. They also learn that animals do not behave in idealistic ways but can be damaging to each other as they establish their hierarchies. These cultures have a much better understanding of animals and their behaviour than our often urban population.

How can poverty be reduced?

To reduce poverty, policies that promote labour-intensive growth accompanied by activities that enhance access by the poor to production assets, credit, infrastructure and technology, must be implemented (Huque 2002). This is where poultry and pig production have several advantages.

Parker (2002) describes principles that have been formulated to increase village poultry production in the Pacific Island villages. Villagers are taught the importance of feeding poultry daily, housing them and confining them away from predators. This provides surplus poultry and eggs. Another thing that should be mentioned in training courses is that improving the bird's welfare has advantages for both the people and the poultry.

Although modern intensive systems in India are equal to those in developed countries (Rajini and Narahari 2002), backyard poultry farming is profitable and provides pin money for rural women to meet small family expenses. The indigenous birds or improved varieties, with no expenditure on feed or other imports, are economical.

The use of nitrogen-fixing trees (e.g. *leucaena*) should be encouraged along with the livestock management system, to provide livestock feed and fuel. Vercoe *et al.* (2000) have been critical of the type of aid given to many animal production systems in developing countries. They comment that organisations and their members have recently been forced to reconsider their position on pigs and poultry, particularly for assistance to the Asian livestock industry. To be effective in any aid program education should start with the farmers.

What about animal ethics and welfare?

If the main concern of people is their day-to-day survival, not much consideration is given to long-term ecological implications or animal welfare is-

sues. In developing countries where livestock industries are expanding, the advent of animal welfare issues, as we now expound them, would be catastrophic. Not only would jobs be lost but starvation and death would result as people struggle to survive another day.

The welfare of people and their living conditions are of more concern for them than animal welfare, although there is a place for helping people to better look after their animals for the benefit of both.

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