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Perspectives on the Welfare of Farmed Fur Animals

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Abstract

Aim was to provide perspectives to question: what should we think about fur animal welfare? Discussion about animal welfare is often based on opinions and beliefs. Scientific facts are forgotten or downplayed. Scientific understanding should be encouraged and emphasized. Caring for animals is associated with an understanding of animal behavior and communication. Caring for animals includes caring for their welfare. Animal welfare legislation can satisfy a basic wellness. When an animal is in balance with itself and its environment, its well-being is good. Well-being is not stable but oscillating: the smaller the oscillation, the better animal welfare can be considered to be. The main parties involved in animal welfare are animal producers, animal activists, the animal itself and legislators. We have three alternatives for the ways in which to keep farmed animals, namely cage, enclosure or nature. Each environment has certain good and bad sides. In the wild, we can find only animals that are alive. Is it right to take only those animals which are alive as a benchmark? Or should we consider also welfare of those who have not coped but died? Discussion on animal welfare is taking place among human beings. Animals cannot speak, so, they can be a party of discussion only indirectly. It is essential that we all let our views be known. We must discuss issues fully, publicly and repeatedly. Finally, we much reach a consensus that will be translated into laws and regulations.

1. Introduction and Aim

There is a widespread consensus that animal welfare of farmed fur animals should be improved. The difficulty here is, however, that all parties do not see animal welfare in the same way. Several definitions are available on animal welfare and how to interpret it [1, 3, 4]. Problematic is also the fact that the measuring of animal welfare is not simple. There is not any single parameter that can exactly tell us about the actual welfare status of farm animal in question [7, 13, 17, 18, 19]. Therefore, we have to measure it from several points of view.

Farmed fur animals have been a target of welfare debate for the several past decades. Research on their welfare has been carried out since 1980's to provide understanding and facts to public discussion and legislative measures [15, 16, 10, 5, 14]. The aim of the present paper is to provide perspectives on the welfare of farmed fur animals.

2. A Scholastic Way to Think About Welfare

Scientific thinking and methodologies have gone through several paradigms throughout the history. In the Middle Ages the prevailing perception was scholasticism. It was mainly based on dialectical reasoning. Decisions were based on

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opinions and views rather than on measureable facts. For example, medieval scientists gathered together to find out how many teeth there were in the mouth of a horse [8]. The matter was discussed and, finally, they concluded that there are a certain number of teeth. After this it was declared to be a fact. The fundamental problem in this method was that nobody went to study the mouth of horse to calculate the true number of teeth in practice. This was a subjective way of solving problems. Today we seem to be facing to this method again. Discussion of fur animal welfare, particularly in the public arena, seems to be based properly on opinions and beliefs. The debate is too much on a sensational level. What seems to matter is whose values carry the most weight, rather than what the actual truth is. Scientific facts are forgotten or downplayed. This is not the right way to proceed. Research and scientific understanding should be encouraged and emphasized [10].

3. Tripartite of Welfare

Tripartite of welfare can be described as the following: (1) healthy animals; (2) healthy people; and, (3) healthy environment. In short, we can say that well-being of the animal is much to do with its own experience of mental and physical state. Mental well-being is related to feelings and pleasure. Fear and suffering undermine the well-being. The physical state is connected with body functioning. Normal body functioning requires the absence of disease and injuries.

Healthy animal is important to the animal producer [18, 19]. The well-being of animal and the farmer depends clearly on each other. Proper interactions and communication in both directions are crucial here. Behaviour is not any on/off matter; animals behave all the time. Caring for animals is associated with an understanding of animal behavior [2]. The main point here is: whether we can understand animal behavior and whether we can communicate with them. Caring for animals includes caring for their welfare.

A healthy environment enables well-being, although it is not the only prerequisite for it. The main questions concerning relationships between an animal and its environment are: (1) should we change the environment to suit to the animal? or, (2) should we adapt the animal to the prevailing environment? [10]. A change of environment includes various structural modifications and enrichments. Adaptation of an animal includes domestication, selection and learning processes. It is important here to provide animals the possibilities to fulfil essential behavioural patterns and needs.

4. Degree Model of Welfare

Animal welfare is a broad concept. Generally it can be seen as a continuum from very good to very poor. Between these two extreme points there is always a kind of welfare. One way or other welfare always does exist. Animal welfare definitions are numerous [1, 3, 4], and evidently new ones will be found in the future. Next I present one simple way as to how that can be seen. Welfare can be divided into three different categories according to the degree of well-being: (1) basic wellness; (2) functional well-being; and (3) a perfect well-being [8]. Basic wellness is fulfilled when animal is healthy, it has no immediate stress, and it grows, reproduces and produces in a normal manner. The main aim of animal welfare legislation and surveillance is to guarantee basic wellness. The next level of well-being, namely functional, includes the concept that animals should have possibilities to behavior species-specifically and satisfy those needs that are essential from animal welfare points of view. The highest degree is then the perfect well-being. All animal species and individuals evidently aim to attain as good a well-being as possible. Perfect wellbeing is a kind of evolutionary vision. However, it is also an evolutionary utopia. It is a goal but can never be reached in reality.

Animal welfare legislation and surveillance should satisfy a fair basic wellness. If it is demanded that animal welfare should be even better, then we have to concentrate more on functional aspects of well-being. Research on animal behavior and welfare is the tool to clarify behaviours crucial for functional well-being. Essential here are the key features of species-specific behaviours. Thus, also the key value of each individual behavior should be considered.

5. Oscillation Pattern of Welfare

If you asked your colleague: "How are you?", the answer would vary according to the moment you released this question in the air. Fifteen minutes ago I had some headache – now it is gone and so on. Nevertheless, your well-being at present is not perfect. You can always find something to complain about. However, actually you are fairly OK and can manage and survive as you do not have any specific problems or disorders. It is the same for animals. Their well-being is varying almost all the time. A stable well-being is not a possible state for them or human beings.

When animal or human being is in balance with itself and the environment, its well-being is good. A perfect state of balance can be described as a straight line (Figure 1 a; [8]). As already previously mentioned, well-being actually never is perfect, i.e. just like a kind of straight line. In reality, well-being is oscillating both sides of this line constantly (Figure 1 b). The smaller the oscillation, the better animal welfare can be considered to be. Thus, it is quite normal and acceptable

that well-being is varying. However, if the degree of this oscillation goes too far, the animal is challenged to keep its well-being in a normal range (Figure 1 c). Finally, this oscillation may go so high, that animal welfare is seriously jeopardized. If the oscillation reached extremely high degree, it finally does not return back to balance level (Figure 1 d). This typically leads to serious welfare problems like illness and death.
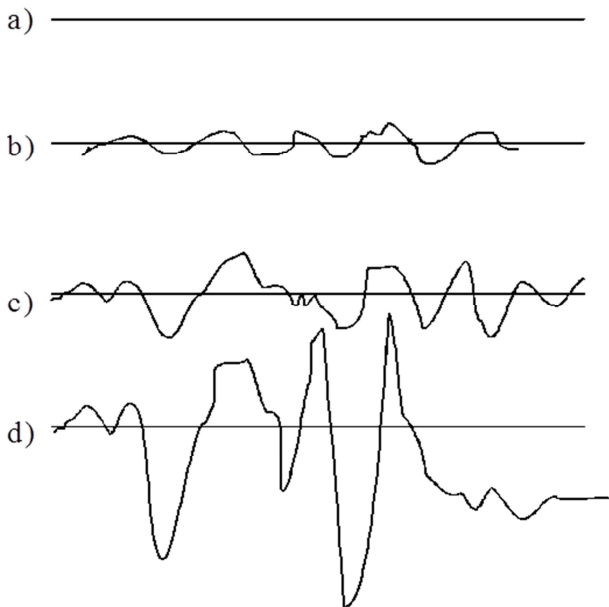

Figure 1. Oscillation patterns of animal welfare [8].

6. Triangels of Welfare Parties

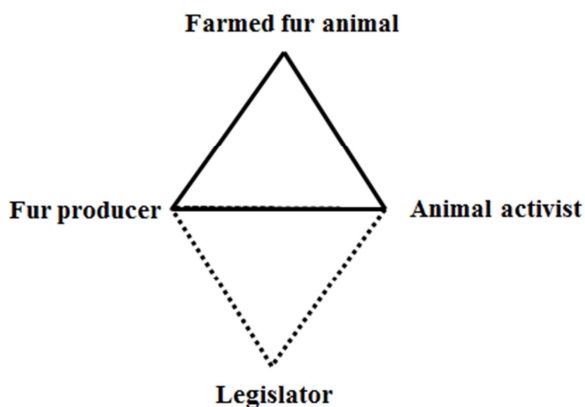There are several parties which influence on how animal welfare is comprised in a large scale (Figure 2; [8]).

Figure 2. Triangels of welfare parties that are linked together [8]. Examples of fur animals (fox, mink, raccoon dog).

First, the fur producer is the key person that influences on it. Farmers are housing animals and, therefore, the way how they are handling them is crucial. Also the farmers' way of thinking and their values are essential. Farmers have their own understanding of how animal welfare in practice should be. They are having also a public opinion on it. The opposite side is animal activists. Some may call them animal conservationists. They often are totally against fur animal production. According to them, farming should be banned. Some of them are willing to allow farming, but want housing conditions to be modified to resemble conditions in the wild. So, farmers and animal activists represent opposite poles. Their views are also often featured in the public eye.

What the opinions of farmers or animal activists are is not the essential question, however. Most crucial is what the opinion of an animal itself is (Figure 2). So, what does mink, fox or raccoon dog think about the matter. Unfortunately, animal cannot speak. Therefore, we cannot go to farm and ask directly from animals how is their welbeing. Instead, we have to find out what kind of changes and improvements there must be done. This means that we have to clarify animal's opinion indirectly [18, 19]. Scientists are needed here in particular. By experimental way we have fairly good possibilities to find out an animal's opinion. This is just what animal welfare research is for. There is also a fourth party in this triangle, namely the legislators. Finally legislation defines frames for housing conditions that are considered sufficient for proper animal welfare. Before making final decision on legislative provisions, the legislator will need to find out the opinions of the other three parties. So, he will discuss with the representatives of fur producers and animal activist organizations to find out their views and perspectives. The legislator has to become familiar with the research on this matter, too. For decision making, he/she should have opinions and facts from these three different parties.

7. Welfare in the Wild

Nature is often seen as a benchmark in animal welfare debate. It may be demanded that animals should be housed in conditions resembling those in the wild. Also natural and species-specific behaviours may be considered outmost important for well-being. Some are considering that animal welfare is guaranteed only in nature.

To be alive, an animal must be alive all the time. It is not a kind of part-time existence. During summer, weather conditions and food abundance may be favorable. However, animals must survive also during winter when the availability of resources may be very limited. This means that animals are not necessarily having good well-being all the time. Also deteriorating welfare and even suffering must be accepted time to time. The aim in the nature is not to be happy or fare well all the time. The aim is to survive and reproduce.

In the wild, we can find only animals that are alive, i.e. successful individuals. Those who have not survived, are dead

and lost. The essential question here is: is it right to take only those animals which are alive as a benchmark? Or should we consider also welfare of those who have not coped but died? It is also difficult to make decision on which part of animal's life should be taken as a point of reference. [9]. Lifespan, reproduction result, mortality, amount of stress, diseases, behavioural repertoire and activity are potential alternatives. It seems that natural life habits and behavior must be defined carefully before comparing it to living in captivity. It is important to find out what is natural behavior of an animal that has been born and lived in housing conditions throughout its life. It does not understand on life in the nature because out of sight typically means also out of mind. It can be expected that farmed blue fox, for example, do not know how is the life of wild arctic fox like. Probably it does not suffer although it cannot live like its wild counterpart.

Needs and requirements in captivity are different than those in the wild. Also needs for survival are different. We can ask: to which extent does the animal born in captivity have the same needs as those born in the wild? The animal captured from the wild returns back to wild when it is released. However, the animal born in captivity may return back to housing environment, i.e. to place where it has learned to get food and shelter. So, when nature calls, the answer is not necessarily the same for all individuals.

8. Alternative Housing Conditions

Principally, we have three alternatives for keeping fur animals, namely cage, enclosure or nature (Figure 3; [6]). Each environment has certain good and bad sides. None is exclusive superior.
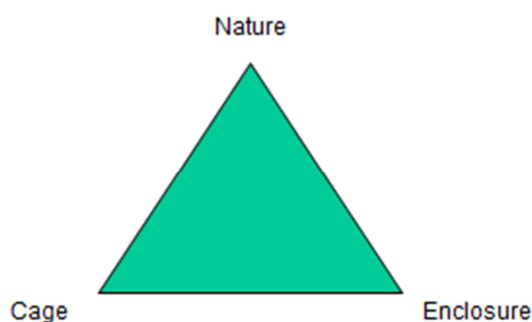

Figure 3. Main alternative environments for farmed fur animals [6].

In nature, animals have freedom to do what they want. They also have possibilities for wide range of species-specific behaviours and activity. In a cage environment, these are most limited. Enclosure provides more freedom than cage but it is, nevertheless, limited space. Quality and availability of food and water are best in cage and enclosure settings. In

nature, abundance and quality of food varies seasonally, yearly, regionally and even individually. An animal's lifespan is variable in nature as it is in other housing alternatives, too. Reproduction success and fur quality are best in cage environment. Poorest these are in enclosure. The temperament of animals is most confident in a cage environment as they are domesticated to the presence of human beings whereas wild animals are the most fearful. Enclosure also increases process of feralization, i.e. tame animal turns wild again. A farmers's ability to control animal health is best in cages.

9. Images and Values of Welfare

Our understanding of the world is now different than it was one hundred years ago. This holds true for our animals and animal production as well. An animal is not just a concrete creature for us but rather a kind of idea or image [9]. We are living in a media world where affirmations are crucial. Urban people's image of animals is highly created by the media. For example, some TV nature programs have influenced us. We would like see nature beautiful, pure and almost innocent. Animals do not suffer there. It seems that nature is so far away from the common urban citizen that its real essence of it cannot be understood. We are living too much at the ideal image level. For example, it is nice to conserve ringed seal, but few of us have seen it in the nature. This animal is not necessarily beautiful as a concrete creature but rather as an image people have of it living in nature. It is also difficult to accept housing of a furry fox in a fairly barren cage. Even more difficult it would be to accept killing of a fox for its nice fur coat.

10. Moral Responsibility and Welfare

We are humans but we are also moral beings. In that sense we are able to consider the advantages and disadvantages of our actions. Our morality is not working only on a basic level, however. It is more than pure calculations of what are consequences of our acts, of what is right and wrong. Moral thinking arises from our innate, instinctual dimensions and also from a learned way of acting. The fact is that humans are the only living creatures which can make moral decisions. Therefore our duty is to determine our relations to animals and animal welfare [2]. The moral question is left for us: how poor welfare should be before it is regarded as unacceptable?

When we are sharing our time, energy or resources, we are often favoring those who are near to us, i.e. our relatives, friends and even pets [12]. This is one reason why animal

conservation is often so important to us. Pet animals are our close companions. Familiar animals may be considered even more valuable than unfamiliar human beings. If your dog and an unknown person fall into the cold river at the same time which one you will save first? The answer may not be totally unambiguous or clear [2].

11. It Is Better Ask the Animal About Welfare

Animals are sentient beings. We can expect that animals are able to evaluate their own state of well-being [9, 11]. They know when their welfare is in jeopardy. In order to be able to adapt and affect its well-being, animals must have the ability to control their environment. They must have the possibility to react to changes in their environment. They must have choices.

The fact is that animals cannot speak, thus, major way they are able to express their opinions is through their behavior. Given that moving animals make choices for each step, and standing animals vote with each foot, is one starting point to evaluate their preferences and opinions. It is better ask the animal as it knows best what it needs. Comprehensive research is needed here to evaluate it. However, knowledge as such is not making decision – not even scientific facts. Human beings are making those decisions. This world is irretrievably anthropocentric. We have to make decisions about the limits for good and acceptable animal welfare and housing conditions.

12. It's Good to Talk About Animal Welfare

Animal welfare is a concept which depends on ethical and aesthetic values [4]. Some people do not see it as acceptable to keep fur animals in cages whether or not animal suffers. They do not like to see such. They are not listening to scientific talk. Our conclusions depend on our world view and values. Anyone can find support in literature and the media for just his/her own opinion. In that way we all may say that my opinion is the right one. It is essential to let our views be known. Issues must be discussed fully, publicly and repeatedly. Finally, a consensus should be found, a consensus that will be written as laws and regulations [2]. Legislation should guarantee animal welfare. We have to give animals licenses for state of faring well.

13. Conclusions

Fur animal welfare is a broad concept meaning that also

measuring of it is not a simple task. Any single variable do not exactly reveal how is the welfare of an animal in question. Therefore, broad scale of measurements and evaluations is needed. It seems that public discussion yet is based too much on pure opinions and beliefs. Unfortunately animals are easily seen a kind of idea or image but not a concrete creatures that are having needs and rights. The present paper encourages us for more research and scientific discussion about fur animal welfare. Enhancement of fur animal welfare should be one of main priorities on scientific agenda.

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