

Attitudes Toward Treatment of Animals Reflect Changing Status Quo

Forty years ago, few would have voiced concern over fox hunts, "downer" cattle in stockyards, or dissecting specimens in high school biology laboratories.

Most of us were unaware that unscrupulous people rounded up untethered dogs for sale to medical laboratories.

Even today, few remember Pepper, a child's "dognapped" pet sold to a research lab. But Pepper's disappearance caused the public indignation that led to passage of the Animal Welfare Act of 1966.

These types of emotionally explosive incidents make prime time news today.

What's changed?

"People's attitudes toward treatment of animals, a younger population and a population disconnected from agriculture," according to Janice Swanson, Kansas State University animal scientist.

"Today, less than 2 percent of the population is in daily contact with livestock production for food," said Swanson at the summer conference of the Kansas Livestock Association in Wichita August 11.

"Most farmers and ranchers have concerns about humane treatment of animals, however, their views of land and animal use have changed less than the consuming public's. Livestock producers must learn to understand what concerns the non-agricultural public and convey basic agricultural information to them in a language they understand."

Before coming to K-State this year to join the International Meat and Livestock Program, Swanson was a technical information specialist at U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal Welfare Information Center, Beltsville, Md. During her five years there, the animal behaviorist fielded questions asked mostly by non-ag people.

Ag groups, she says, frequently invite her to talk about the activities of the most extreme animal activists. "But those groups shouldn't be the greatest concern for animal food producers," she warns. "It would be more productive to focus on the concerns of the 'troubled middle,' those who have concerns about animals in confinement production systems, deprivation and humane treatment of animals.

"Agriculture needs to understand and resolve those concerns. Producers also need to realize that they're talking only to themselves when they discuss production efficiency to explain what they do. Most people don't look at animals as economic units and some of the terms producers

use turn off the general public," she says.

"The easiest thing in the world is to take a polarized position, however, it never resolves a controversy. Animal scientists can answer some concerns, but we can't answer others without more research. Still others deserve ethical scrutiny."

Swanson described the groups concerned about animals, pointing out that activists are well-versed in studies that identify vulnerable target groups and use that information to change attitudes.

"Attitudes within advocacy groups continue to evolve. It is important to understand the significant differences between animal welfare and animal rights groups and how attitudes are changing within these groups."

Using descriptions from Paul Thompson of the Texas A&M Biotechnology Center, she defined the conceptual, political and philosophical differences between animal welfarists and animal rightists.

The Views that Separate Them

Animal Welfarists:

Conceptual — Animal welfare indicates a state of well-being.

Political — Welfare is a more moderate position and attracts a larger segment of society.

Philosophical — Outlook born out of a utilitarian attitude (how animals can be useful to people). They will look at costs and benefits of the use of animals for food, work and research.

Animal Rightists:

Conceptual — Concerned with claims and entitlements for animals.

Political — Hold a more radical view. People should not use animals, and base efforts on their own moralistic values.

Philosophical — Born from a moralistic basis of reasoning.

Swanson also reviewed a benchmark U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study by Stephen R. Kellert in the 1970s on the public's fundamental attitudes, perceptions and understanding of animals.

Environmental, animal welfare and rights groups recognized broader implications of his study and have applied Kellert's findings to identify and target groups to persuade and recruit to their views regarding animals.

Members of the National Cattlemen's Association and National Sheep Breeders Association were among the 3,107 people Kellert randomly selected to answer his survey questions.

Kellert identified 10 attitude categories, then compared the frequency of responses on the basis of sex, ethnic background, age and occupation. The attitude categories and the feelings associated with them included

Naturalistic — having affection for wildlife and outdoors;

Ecologicistic — concern with how animals interact or impact on the total environment;

Humanistic — affection for individual animals (primarily pets);

Moralistic — concern for humane treatment of animals and strong opposition toward exploitation of animals or animal cruelty;

Scientific — interested in physical activities and biology of animals;

Aesthetic — interested in the beauty and symbolic characteristics of animals;

Utilitarian — interested in ownership and cost-benefit factors associated with animals;

Dominionistic — man must be in control over animals;

Negativistic — people who actively avoid animals out of fear or dislike of them;

Neutralistic — passive avoidance of animals out of lack of interest.

The most common and evenly divided feelings about animals were moralistic versus utilitarian (each by 20 percent of the respondents), and humanistic versus neutralistic (with 37 and 35 percent of the respondents, respectively).

Less than 3 percent of the population prescribed to the dominion or control over animals or the scientific interest in animals. Craftsmen had the highest neutral feelings and farmers were more oriented toward utilitarianism.

"What the findings should tell producers is that these different groups are not speaking the same language," says Swanson. Most of them don't identify with the concerns of producers.

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