

Society is Shaping Animal Welfare

by Troy Smith

Animal husbandry has been defined as that branch of agriculture concerned with the care and breeding of domestic animals, particularly those animals used as food or product sources. But the term *animal husbandry* has largely been dropped from the agricultural education lexicon. Generally, it's been replaced by *animal science*, which has been collectively defined as disciplines of study that investigate biological issues such as physiology, anatomy, reproduction and development of domestic animals or animals that are controlled and cared for, to some degree, by humans. It certainly has a more academic sound. It's more . . . well, scientific.

Ever wonder, though, if swapping husbandry for science was a good idea? According to Purdue University Associate Professor of Animal Behavior and Well-Being Candace Croney, it probably contributed, in part, to society's concern over how much care goes into livestock production. Even as a vast majority of the population becomes increasingly disconnected with how livestock production actually works, people are becoming more interested in the ethics involved. To them, husbandry connotes a dedication to caring for animals, as opposed to applying scientific management practices to achieve economic gain.

Croney isn't surprised by the escalating debate over what it means to do right by animals. It has been fueled by perceptions of "factory farms" where animals are mass-produced, like widgets from an assembly line, without individual care. People would much prefer the "Old MacDonald's Farm" model, or what they think that is. Plus, a big driver of debate is the fact that most Americans keep pets.

Relationships

"Even in rural areas, many people look upon companion animals as members of the family, celebrating their birthdays and buying them gifts," says Croney. "There is something about companion animal ownership that skews opinions about animal welfare issues."

Relationships between people and their pets more closely resemble relationships between humans. Add in what Croney calls the "Disney factor" — attributing animals with human characteristics — and animals are thought to experience pain and emotion in the same



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► "You're still in the driver's seat," Candace Croney, Purdue University associate professor of animal behavior and well-being says. "The beef industry hasn't come under heavy fire yet. Go to work while you still have time."

ways humans do. It colors the way people feel about animals in general.

"It becomes a paradigm for other animals, including food animals," adds Croney. "And how people feel about animals trumps science."

Consequently, it doesn't matter if the reasons behind certain livestock production practices are science-based. It doesn't matter if management in a production environment may provide more adequately for animals' physical well-being than a "natural" environment. Nor does it seem to matter that the same people who object to the close quarters provided to laying hens may have no problem with keeping a pet parakeet caged. The difference is that the pet is loved. It has become emotional.

According to Croney, animal rights groups are becoming experts at playing to society's feelings for animals, ramping up the emotion in their media messages. Social media now provides a means for spreading messages faster and farther. Access to web-based and mobile technologies allow the spread of user-generated content related to livestock

production, but it's not always quality information. At one extreme is outright false information. At the other is some bad stuff that's true. Not all of those videos are

"manufactured" to malign livestock production.

"Unfortunately, there are instances of

animal abuse," says Croney, noting how "worst case" videos are dispersed by organizations like Mercy for Animals. "So what's the average person to think? People wonder if livestock producers put profits first, over ethical or moral considerations."

Since that notion isn't likely to go away, Croney says livestock industries have no choice but to address it. Working in their favor is that people still want to trust farmers and ranchers. While animal welfare issues are big, she believes society is not overly concerned with animal rights. Granted, some people don't fully understand the difference, but it's becoming clearer as they understand differences among advocacy groups.

"Members of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) put themselves in the crazy camp, saying animals should not be kept as pets," says Croney. "That idea is not gaining traction."

In contrast, the public perceives the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) as more reasonable than radical. HSUS has been effective, explains Croney, because it has presented more moderate messages that seemingly emphasize animal welfare issues.

"You have to look closely to see the animal rights focus underneath," adds Croney. "Most people don't do that. Generally, the public's attention span is short, and a 30-second message is about all they get."

Legislative approach

Groups like HSUS have been effective in furthering animal welfare legislation, mostly through ballot initiatives. They've picked issues like housing and handling, which are visible and easy for the public to understand. They tried to claim the moral high ground, appealing to the public's sense of compassion, justice and even religious values. They developed modest appeals for change, building relationships with opinion leaders, legislators and influential companies. They compiled and presented data selected from scientific research and cited supportive results of public polls.

A string of successes started with Florida's banning of sow gestation crates in 2002. Since 2006, legislation related to housing and other production practices has been adopted in Arizona, Oregon, Colorado, California, Maine, Michigan and Ohio. Legislation has been proposed in Massachusetts, Washington, New York and Illinois. More can be expected, advises Croney, as well as attempts to enact federal legislation that would eliminate variations in state law.



From the experience thus far, warns Croney, livestock producers should learn that welfare reform is becoming a mainstream issue, and the challenge won't be met by defending the status quo. Dismissing welfare concerns as emotional and irrational won't work, and neither will an insistence on science as the sole basis for making decisions. Saying producers treat animals humanely because doing otherwise wouldn't make any money is true, but it won't dispel the "profit first" perception that producers see welfare as a matter of economics and not an ethical obligation.

Croney says producers have to evaluate the kind of image they project and how that fits with what the public wants. Overall, she believes beef producers have a favorable image. They are thought of as honest and hard-working, and the public wants to believe they are good stewards of resources. There are questions, however, about their methods.

These questions have stimulated the growth of niche markets for beef produced under systems promoted for their natural, organic or humane production attributes. Under pressure from the public, certain retailers have developed program standards to which their suppliers must conform. A danger to the beef industry is the positioning of some production systems as safer or otherwise better. It only helps industry foes to "divide and conquer," states Croney.

Setting the agenda

Producers can expect retailers to continue to exert influence over how animals are raised, with regard to welfare issues. The "regulation" train left the station years ago and continues to build steam. Croney advises producers to plan for it. She advises the beef industry to identify and address key welfare issues, including confinement housing, pain management, animal handling and transport, and methods of euthanasia.

"It's essential for animal agriculture to set the agenda," Croney insists. "Continuing to let others do so only further erodes 'public' trust."

To further build their image, Croney advises beef producers to:

- ▶ Evaluate your operation; consider what you do and reasons why; then make small but substantial changes where warranted.
- ▶ Adopt zero-tolerance for offending producers. Make a statement condemning improper management practices whenever they are evident. Hang on to the moral high ground.
- ▶ Educate the public by telling what you do and why it is right. Keep telling them.
- ▶ Seek the endorsement of experts that appeal to the public. Temple Grandin is one example.

- ▶ Participate in Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) and consider a voluntary welfare assurance program.

Croney says the beef industry and individual producers need to market their image relative to animal welfare issues by explaining how livestock production is animal-friendly while providing the products consumers want. Tell them how animal welfare is a product of good animal husbandry. That should include an explanation of practices applied when there is no promise of economic return.

"Social media won't save you, but use it to

tell your story. Respond to nasty (magazine and newspaper) articles and blogs," advises Croney. "But realize that most consumers do not turn to ag publications and websites as sources of information. Try to put your story where it does the most good. Get it to opinion-shapers in the media, public relations and academia, but don't waste a lot of time on people who have already made up their mind.

"You're still in the driver's seat," adds Croney. "The beef industry hasn't come under heavy fire yet. Go to work while you still have time."

