

Have they lost their minds?

Arguing for Animal Rights Like Humans

by *Wes Ishmael*

All together now: Boooooooo! Pfffffft! That's what the cattle industry rightfully says to radical animal rights groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS).

There's PETA, with its naked celebrities shedding their furs, the inflammatory public relations campaigns aimed at everything from the exploitation of tadpoles to animals used for recreation and entertainment to mainstream livestock production and on and on.

There's Ingrid Newkirk, PETA president and co-founder, saying on a CNN newscast, as Great Britain was being rocked by foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) in 2001, "I openly hope that it comes here. It will bring economic harm only for those who profit from giving people heart attacks and giving animals a concentration camp-like existence. It would be good for animals, good for human health and good for the environment."

Then there's the more refined Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), with its undercover videos, massive budget and political savvy, petitioning producers into corners while parading itself as a true animal welfare organization.

According to a profile from the Center for Consumer Freedom, HSUS "is a humane society in name only, since it doesn't operate a single pet shelter or pet adoption facility anywhere in the United States. During 2007, HSUS contributed only 3.64% of its budget to organizations that operate hands-on dog and cat shelters. In reality, HSUS is a wealthy animal-rights lobbying organization (the largest and richest on earth) that agitates for the same goals as PETA and other radical groups."

The unhidden agenda for organizations like these is to rid the world of meat consumption. So far, they've offered no alternative solutions to the protein void were they to be successful.

Enough of that. It's too easy to get mad at such groups and overlook the mainstream debate they bastardize to fill their coffers from the unknowing.

Defend this

Never listen to Bernie Rollin unless you're prepared to have your comfortable world of black and white smudged up a bit. He's the world-renowned expert on veterinary medical ethics. He's a professor of both philosophy and animal science at Colorado State University.

At last December's Range Beef Cow Symposium (RBCS; www.rangebeefcow.com), Rollin presented a paper entitled, "Animal Rights as a Mainstream Phenomenon." In it he outlines the ethical revolutions in Western society for the past 50 years. Think here of everything from feminism and the Civil Rights Movement to animal welfare.

For virtually all of human history, Rollin says, animal agriculture was based on animal husbandry. That term still gets bandied about, but Rollin uses the term specifically.

"Husbandry, derived from the old Norse word 'hus/band,' bonded to the household, meant taking great pains to put one's animals into the best possible environment one could find to meet their physical and psychological natures . . .," Rollin explains. "In husbandry, a producer did well if and only if the animals

did well, so productivity was tied to welfare. No social ethic was thus needed to ensure proper animal treatment; only the anti-cruelty

(laws) designed to deal with sadists and psychopaths was needed to augment husbandry. Self-interest virtually assured good treatment."

Yes, producers worth their salt still go above and beyond in caring for their livestock. Rollin recognizes that. But he also points out the basic relationship between livestock and their stewards changed in the wake of World War II (WWII). That's when the U.S. government and its society wanted to ensure there would be plenty of affordable food. The Great Depression was still a close memory, after all.

Consequently, producers began utilizing new technology and management to produce more with fewer acres, fewer head of livestock for the same or less money. Looking over today's shoulder, that wasn't a conscious decision; it was the slow deliberate reaction of producers to evolving farm policy and the markets.

In doing so, Rollin says, "With technological sanders — hormones, vaccines, antibiotics, air-handling systems, mechanization — we could force square pegs into round holes, and place animals into environments where they suffered in ways irrelevant to productivity."

Now, think back to the ethical revolutions Rollin mentioned. For more than 50 years, he explains, Western society has continued to extend its moral categories for humans to people previously morally ignored by society, such as women, ethnic minorities, the handicapped and so on.

"So a plausible and obvious move is for society to continue in its tendency and attempt to extend the moral machinery it has developed for dealing with people, appropriately modified, to animals. And this is precisely what has occurred. Society has taken elements of the moral categories it uses for assessing the treatment of people and is in the process of modifying these concepts to make them appropriate for dealing with new issues in the treatment of animals, especially their use in science and confinement agriculture."

It's about ethics, not science

This has nothing to do with science. Rollin serves on the National Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production (Pew Commission), which is a dirty word for many livestock producers.

A few years back, the Pew Commission was charged with the responsibility of studying intensive animal agriculture in the United States. In the process, Rollin says in his paper, one livestock industry representative testifying before the Commission said it could allay the industry's anxiety about the study if the industry knew the Commission's conclusions and



recommendations would be based on science.

Rollin explains, “Hoping to rectify the error in that comment, as well as educate the numerous industry representatives present, I responded to her as follows: ‘Madame, if we on the Commission were asking the question of how to raise swine in confinement, science could certainly answer that question for us. But that is not the question the Commission, or society, is asking. What we are asking is, *ought* we raise swine in confinement?’”

The Pew Commission report — *Putting Meat on the Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production (IFAP) in America* — has this to say about animal welfare: “IFAP methods for raising food animals have generated concern and debate over just what constitutes a reasonable life for animals and what kind of quality of life we owe the animals in our care. It is an ethical dilemma that transcends objective scientific measures, and incorporates value-based concerns.

“Physical health as measured by absence of some diseases or predation, for example, may be enhanced through confinement since the animals may not be exposed to certain infectious agents or sources of injury that would be encountered if the animals were raised outside of confinement. It is clear, however, that good animal welfare can no longer be assumed based only on the absence of disease or productivity outcomes.

“Intensive confinement (e.g., gestation crates for swine, battery cages for laying hens) often so severely restricts movement and natural behaviors, such as the ability to walk or lie on natural materials, having enough floor space to move with some freedom, and rooting for pigs, that it increases the likelihood that the animals suffer severe distress.”

Among the animal welfare recommendations made in the Pew Commission report: “Phase out the most intensive and inhumane production practices within a decade to reduce IFAP risks to public health and improve animal well-being.” Of the seven practices cited, sow gestation crates, dairy cattle tail docking and poultry battery

cages have become illegal in some states or are in the process of becoming so.

When considered through the lenses of science and production, these recommendations can seem both ignorant and arrogant. But when you pose the same question — Ought we? — that Rollin did to the aforementioned industry representative worried about the science, it’s easier to understand the conclusions.

Last November, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) issued a point-by-point response to the Pew Commission IFAP report.

Broadly, in the executive summary of the response, AVMA says, “In our analysis of the Pew Commission’s report, we found several areas of concern, beginning with the technical assemblage of academics to research and review the report. The Pew Commission purports to have utilized a process that melds the thoughts of top academics and diverse stakeholders into its grandiose examination of food animal production. However, the Pew Commission’s process for gaining technical expertise in the technical reports was biased and did not incorporate the findings and suggestions of a significant number of participating academicians. We caution readers that we found disparities within the report, potentially due to the lack of incorporation of differing interpretations and conclusions offered by subject matter experts.”

In the area of IFAP animal welfare recommendations, the AVMA says, in part, “While we believe there is value in some of the recommendations offered by the Pew Commission, we assert that many of the Commission’s sub-points have significant shortfalls and lack in comprehensive idea development or in how the Commission would execute a new plan or program ... its recommendations inappropriately assume that intensive methods of farmed animal production are patently inhumane.” AVMA goes on to list several misconceptions, such as the assertion that increased living space

for livestock results in improved welfare.

“A complete assessment of welfare requires consideration of animals’ physiological and psychological needs. In general, intensive animal production systems better satisfy the physiological and health needs of animals, whereas extensive animal production systems better satisfy the behavioral needs. Because the advantages and disadvantages of farmed animal production systems for animal welfare are qualitatively different, there is no simple or objective way to rank systems for overall welfare,” explains the AVMA response. “Maintaining good welfare within production systems involves tradeoffs. For example, production systems that allow animals to perform natural behaviors (e.g., providing substrates that permit swine to root) may present more challenges for disease and injury control. Conversely, using intensive confinement to improve disease and injury control often limits animals’ ability to engage in normal behaviors.”

In the case of the beef cattle, Rollin believes the practices the industry must get away from are hot-iron branding, dehorning without anesthesia and castration without anesthesia.

All of this only skims the surface of Rollin’s insightful and eloquent case in logic, but it gets at what’s behind the mainstream animal welfare groups’ concerns. It explains why otherwise intelligent-seeming folks can throw out notions that are anathema to efficient mainstream production.

Agree or disagree with Rollin’s points, but understand this is the psyche behind the mainstream animal welfare debate, not the lamebrain issues tossed around by the radical groups like PETA and HSUS in the name of fundraising.

For Rollins’ paper, see www.rangebeefcow.com/2009/documents/Rollin-Bernard_E.pdf.

For the Pew Commission report see www.ncifap.org/bin/e/j/PCIFAPFin.pdf.

For the AVMA response, see www.avma.org/advocacy/PEWresponse/PEW_report_response.pdf.

