

When you list your family members, are Fluffy and Fido among them? For an increasing number of urban Americans, the answer is a resounding yes. Once seen as commodities and tools, animals are increasingly seen as nonhuman family members rather than as property. And with changing roles comes changing legal and political status.

As consumers struggle with their competing desires for one animal at the center of their plate and another animal at the center of their heart, the animal protection movement gains strength in America.

Changing roles

In societies throughout history, animals have had multiple roles, including tools, instruments, food sources, beasts of burden and symbols. Until recently, only among the rich have they been seen as pets or companions. But with industrialization, beginning in the late 1700s, the roles of animals changed. As people moved from the countryside into cities, their animals moved with them and into their houses.

"I believe that the relationship of people to animals has fundamentally changed, and in many ways that has forced our policies and practices to change. Animals have gone from being tools and commodities to something else entirely," says Wes Jamison, a researcher in the department of public relations at the University of Florida who studies issues concerning the rural-urban divide. "Hence, we in animal agriculture can't treat them as tools or commodities anymore. It is no longer sufficient to make scientific and economic arguments about the treatment of farm animals as commodities. Animal protection is now a highly symbolic, moral concern for many Americans."

The animal protection movement emerged in the late 1800s in England as people began to pay particular attention to the way animals were treated. Speaking at the National Institute for Animal Agriculture (NIAA) annual meeting in April, Jamison said this attention steadily grew until society reached a new era in animal protection, starting around the 1960s and continuing through current times.



Why is this happening here?

"Why is it that some cultures, such as in America, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and western Europe, experience these issues with animal protection but no other place around the world does to any extent? Why do some cultures develop an animal protection movement, but others don't?" Jamison asks.

He says there are four factors that have led to the growth of animal protection in certain cultures, including ours: urbanization, anthropomorphism, evolutionary biology and equality.

Urbanization. "Once people move from rural areas to the cities, pet ownership tends to increase. When animals go from the barnyard into the living room, their role changes from a tool or commodity to more akin to a nonhuman child," Jamison says, noting that pet owners often say that their animals provide everything that is lacking for them in their human relationships — companionship and longtime, unconditional love.

"Urbanites will tell you that pets are the perfect family members. They're the spouses that never divorce them, the children that never leave them and the relatives that never put them away in nursing homes," Jamison says. "These are the only animals these people know, and they see them as their nonhuman family members."

Anthropomorphism.

Anthropomorphism is the projection of human characteristics onto animals. Cultures throughout history have done this to some extent, he explains, but in the last 120 years it has greatly amplified in Western cultures.

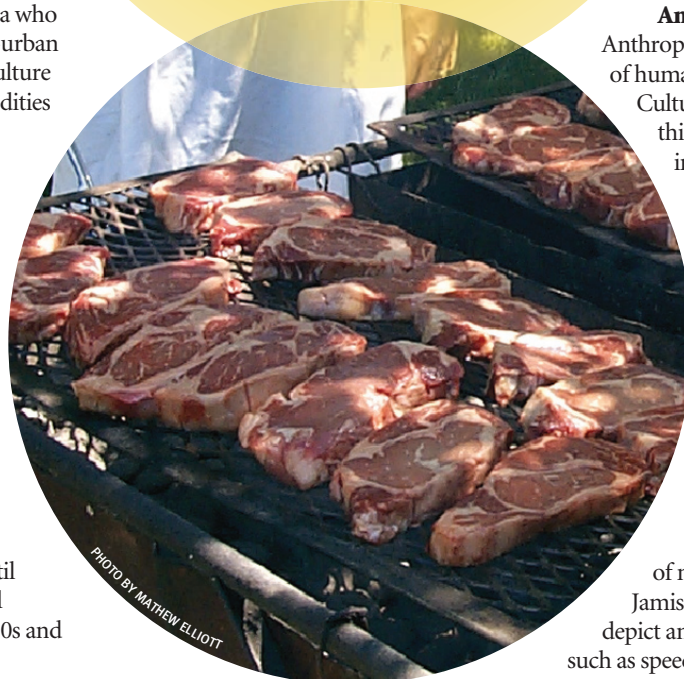
"We now have urbanites that experience animals only in the home as companions, and they have really anthropomorphized these animals in their lives by projecting human qualities on them. Pets have human-sounding names, wear human-looking clothes and can even be dropped off at daycare like your children," Jamison says.

As the predominant example of mainstream anthropomorphism, Jamison points to children's shows that depict animals with human characteristics, such as speech, emotions and interaction with

Companion or Cuisine?

The development and direction of the animal protection movement.

by Meghan Richey



others. Think of Animal Planet TV and Disney movies as prime examples.

Evolutionary biology. Jamison says it's hard to overestimate the effect of the theory of evolutionary biology upon the way we view animals and our relationship to them.

"As children we grew up with pets, and a number of images taught us that animals think and feel and speak just as we do. Then as adults we learn that the science behind evolutionary biology tells us that indeed we are descendents of the animals around us and are, therefore, very, very similar to them," he says.

Equality. In Western cultures we protect through legislation those things that are like us, he explains. For example, in America in 1776 very few people had rights or standing in the political culture. Throughout our history, classes of people such as women and African-Americans, have since gained protection and equality through legislation as the dominant society has recognized them to be similar to itself.

"The expanding rights of animals are similar to the expanding rights of people in different social classes throughout history," Jamison says. "With evolutionary biology telling us that animals really are similar to us, society reaches the conclusion that animals need protection just as we do."

Pets have been the first animals to make the leap to legal protection. For example, Jamison describes the differences between standards of treatment for a pet potbelly pig vs. for pigs raised with traditional agricultural production practices. Some farm animals have made the leap, too. Specifically, horses were once seen as agricultural beasts of burden, but they are now more commonly companions and received legal protection for the first time through recent political action regarding horse slaughter in the U.S.

All guilty

"We may mock animal welfare or animal rights activists, but we've all been guilty to some extent in allowing ourselves and our children to be influenced by these factors that present animals as something other than commodities or tools," Jamison says. "We have pet animals living with us in our homes like family members. We read our children stories about Babe, Black Beauty and Bambi. We give them stuffed animals even as they're still in their cribs so they grow up with the view that animals are companions. Then, as adults, we learn the science behind evolutionary biology, and we begin to see that we really, really are very similar to those animals around us.

"Of course we're guilty. Look at all the signals society gives us that animals are something other than commodities and tools," he continues, noting that sociologists and anthropologists studying animal protection have reached the same conclusion about society's cues.

The legitimacy gap

Molded by the above four factors, the animal protection movement has left society trying to decide if animals are family or food. Jamison showed a print ad promoting vegetarianism that depicted a chicken's body with a pet cat's head and a call out that asked, "If your cat tasted like chicken would you eat her?"

"For me the answer is yes. She would probably taste pretty good. But [with] that being said, what the other side — those who oppose

animal agriculture — are trying to do with that ad is illuminate the gap that one animal is raised as a commodity and another animal is kept as kin."

In mass communication theory, Jamison says, animal agriculture has what is called a legitimacy gap.

"On one side of the Grand Canyon-sized gap is the less than 1% of the population that actually raises animals as food. On the other side are the urbanized, anthropomorphized, egalitarian consumers who, although they want their meat, also want their pets," he explains.

This creates an enormous problem for modern meat consumers who want to eat one animal and pet another.

"It creates a tremendous amount of discomfort and hypocrisy for them that they greet some animals like they would their family members and other animals they eat as food. Opponents of animal agriculture have made it their mission to amplify consumers' anxiety over this relationship," Jamison says. "Their goal is to illuminate that legitimacy gap between how animals are raised as a commodity and how they are lived with as companions."

Further widening the gap is the fact that consumers have minimal understanding of how an animal on the farm becomes food on their plate.

Studies across the country also show that consumers see the treatment of agricultural animals through a pet frame of reference. Jamison says that agriculture is partly to blame here, since we're often shy in showing consumers the production process.

"We often blanch in showing consumers what happens in turning a hog raised in confinement into a beautiful and appetizing pork loin dish for their dinner table. So then we have a consumer population that likes pork loin but is utterly disconnected from the reality that how they treat their pet animal is not the same as what happens to a commodity animal," he says.

The future

Consumers won't stop eating meat but they will increasingly support seemingly innocuous regulations and legislation, Jamison says. To make their meat-eating-caused guilt go away, they'll give \$10 to a campaign that mandates an extra 2 feet (ft.) in a sow stall, for example.

No society in history has done away with animal consumption, though many have tried to do away with animal production. American animal agriculture will maintain itself, Jamison says, until the cost of regulation and legislation removes its competitive edge. Then the industry will move outside our borders. Jamison says the key is managing the legitimacy gap in a society where consumers who eat meat do not and cannot understand the production of those animals. He says the gap between those two is increasing, and the history of animal protection shows us that the future holds even more conflict over the contested role of animals.

"The answer is developing a marketing approach to dealing with consumers and forming alliances. We also need to show consumers the entire production process," Jamison says. "Those opposed to animal agriculture currently claim the moral high ground for their cause, but we can begin to try to own the moral high ground by arguing that we can't do everything that society wants us to do and still stay in business, but we will do what we can."

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