

Cultural, religious and ethical issues of farm animal welfare

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Domestication of animals for food and as companions seems to be the origin of cultures (customs), religions (beliefs) and ethics (values). A synonym of culture is civilization. Literature suggests that the farming of crops and animals contributed to the wealth and well being of our ancestors and played key roles in the advancement of civilizations. Owing to this, animals had a special place in human civilization. Religions evolved to strengthen or provide new moral guidelines, values and codes. All the major religions include the notion of compassion and/or proper and respectful treatment of animals.

However, some practices that seem controversial today (e.g. slaughter without stunning), came into effect many centuries ago because they seemed to be the 'most humane' at the time. However, it is often ignorance, neglect or convenience that causes unnecessary suffering, pain and distress in animals (e.g. carbon dioxide stunning) and these practices are not true adherence to the ideals of a culture. 'Culture' or 'tradition' is not a valid reason to excuse actions that are harmful to animals. Ethics evolved with humankind and it will continue to do so because individuals and society as a whole require value and meaning for their actions. Commitment to improving animal welfare should become a 'universal culture', which is the way forward to attaining standards that are ethically justifiable.

The majority of people in this world rely on animals for food (consume meat, milk and its products and eggs) and many developing countries rely on animals as a source of energy to produce food crops (e.g. ploughing). It is generally believed that our attitude to animals is influenced by culture, religion and ethics, which are intrinsically linked. Most of us live in a multicultural society and "Multiculturalism itself is simply the existence and interaction of difference. The problem is how some people react to that difference" (Paul Gorski, Association of Professional Humane Educators (APHE); <http://aphe.vvview.org>). Needless to say, the intention of this conference and, particularly, this paper, is not to provoke or elucidate these 'reactions' but to seek common ground to ensuring animal welfare globally. Some animals are considered as pets in some countries, whereas, in others they are a potential source of food.

This is a contrast rather than a conflict in our multicultural society. Farming of animals for food is an integral part of agriculture and has been practiced for many centuries with little change. Our increased concern for animal welfare emerges at least on two grounds: (1) large scale industrial farming systems are seen as mass exploitation of animals and not conducive to ensuring animal welfare; and (2) consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about animal welfare and food safety. Duncan and Fraser (1997) aptly wrote, "Animal Welfare is not a term that arose in science to express a scientific concept. Rather it arose in society to express ethical concerns regarding the treatment of animals." It is therefore not surprising to note that a stakeholder in the UK said, "Keeping animals is a privilege, not a right," when asked to comment upon 'animal keepers' during a recent consultation process (DEFRA, 2003). The world is becoming one marketplace. For example, chickens produced in Thailand and Brazil are consumed in Europe. Therefore, producers in countries wanting to export cannot afford to ignore the consumer concerns in importing countries, if they wish to sustain their economic prosperity and trade. For example, perceived animal welfare benefits have been suggested as an important aspect of consumer motivation in buying organic food and European farmers have certainly

responded to this demand. Taking the UK as an example, the estimated farm gate value of organically grown food derived from farm animals has increased dramatically in recent years.