



DEAD COWS DON'T LIE!! MOO NEWS TELLS YOU WHY!

Cows with names yield more milk...*REALLY?*

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Kumquat, Forever Lady, Ursula, Daisy - These cows have names. Do they produce more milk?

According to an internet blog by David Braun, head of the National Geographic daily online news service, they do. Braun, is said to have a “front row seat on the developments of science, nature, and cultures” and recently titled his blog “Cows with names yield more milk”. By doing so he put his own spin on a scientific article by UK researchers Bertenshaw and Rowlison. His interpretation of the research caused a heated discussion among bovine practitioners – some admitting that they always ask “what’s her name”, while others were irritated that a scientific journal would come to such a conclusion.

But do the cows named above really milk more? And if so, if we name them now will they milk more later? And what about the beef from cows with names? Before you go out and name all your low milk EPD cows and your poor milking cows, let’s take a look at the study referred to in National Geographic. Although the headlines talked about naming cows, this is really a study about stockmanship, husbandry, and attitude, not names, although there is an interesting bit of information about cows with names.

The study* randomly surveyed 1,000 dairy farms in England and Wales. The questions were designed to characterize human-animal relationships on UK dairy farms, to explore how the relationship between the stockperson and their cattle affected production, to gauge the stockperson’s knowledge of causes and impact on fearful cows, and to determine whether these producers believed in “animal mind”.

Of the 1,000 surveys mailed out, 560 were returned – an excellent return rate for a survey. While survey data may show a bias, (only those who “cared deeply” responded) if 56% of UK dairy farmers “care deeply” that in itself is interesting and important. Ninety-three percent of those who responded were male; most between the ages of 25 and 55, and 90% had worked with cows for more than 15 years.

The mean herd size was 144, including on average 32 heifers. Milk yield for cows during the 10-month lactation was 7799 liters and heifers 6920 liters.

When asked about how cows and heifers would respond to a usual stock person versus an unfamiliar individual, not surprisingly, most believed that in both situations cows were easier to approach than heifers. The survey also revealed that fear of humans does not appear to be a great welfare or production concern to these farmers.

When asked “What causes a cow to have a good milking temperament?” responses such as: previous experience (52%), “human contact” (48%) and genetics (65%) were given as the primary reasons. Specific answers all related to individual human contact and included “I think the more you handle them the more confidence they have in you”, “She was treated like a person by a lady”, “Human care and contact” and “Young stock more docile when reared by a woman”. Many responses described stroking or petting and treating the calf with kindness. Several noted that the first calf, a sick calf, or the “right colored calf” might get more attention and therefore be more docile as adults.

Interestingly, 76% reported that genetics were responsible for their most difficult milkers, while previous negative experience or suffering discomfort were reported less often as a cause of poor milking temperament.

While 93% of respondents thought it was important to know all individual cows, only 66% reported that they “knew all their cows”. And here is the punch line the National Geographic jumped on – of all the farms surveyed, 48% reported calling their cows by name. Farms where cows were called by name had a 258 liter greater milk yield than farms that did not call their cows by name. Does that mean calling cows by name increases milk yield or if you name your cow it will milk more? Absolutely not –what it does suggest is that there is a relationship between cows that are called by name and increased milk yield.

So what is the bottom line? The stock person has an influence on the behavior and production of these dairy cows. No one would argue with that, and it concurs with work in beef cattle by Temple Grandin and others. The authors also suggest that treating cows as individuals, interacting with them and talking to them can enhance welfare, the human-animal bond, and production. The authors conclude "These results create a positive profile of caring and respectful attitudes of UK farmers to their stock, and this image should be promoted to the public".

With animal rights groups identifying and publicizing abhorrent treatment of food producing animals in the US, we as producers, veterinarians, and others in the beef business need to not only provide optimum welfare, care and humane handling of our stock, but also assure the non agriculture public that the animals they eat are well taken care of. The public doesn't want specifics; they want to know that we care.

**Bertenshaw C & Rowlinson P. Exploring stock managers' perceptions of the human-animal relationship on dairy farms and an association with milk production. Anthrozoos 22:59-69, 2009.*

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