



ANIMAL CARE AND HUMAN PERCEPTIONS

Treating farm animals well does not make them pets; it makes us good caretakers and good human beings.

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Editor's note: In the February issue, we ran a commentary titled "Comfortable beef cattle: An illusion of knowledge," by Drs. Don Höglund and Bonnie Beaver. This article is in response to that commentary.

In most households in the U.S., Fido is considered a member of the family. He may sleep on the bed, consume specialty food and receive excellent preventative health care. Dogs provide companionship, therapy and socialization, and are involved in police and military work, search and rescue, detection of drugs, mines, bombs and contraband food. But move Fido to East Asia, and he might be served for dinner.

For the Maasai, cattle are considered everything: food, material, culture and ritual. The Maasai greeting is "I hope your cattle are well." In India, the cow is greatly revered by Hindus and is regarded as sacred. Mahatma Gandhi said, "If someone were to ask me what the most important outward manifestation of Hinduism was, I would suggest that it was the idea of cow protection." In the West, cattle are raised primarily for food.

Culture changes the fortune of animals, but culture does not change their physiology. Dogs in the U.S. have the same neural system and the same ability to feel pain, stress and frustration as dogs destined as dinner in East Asia. In general, animals that provide pleasure, comfort or companionship to humans are treated better and regarded with more respect than those reared for food.

In 1997, the European Union added the concept of "animal sentience" into basic law. The legally binding protocol annexed to the Treaty of Amsterdam recognizes that animals are "sentient beings," and requires the EU and its members to "pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals." The dictionary defines "sentience" as the power of sense, perception or sensation, or consciousness. What the law says is it matters to animals how we treat them because they are sentient—capable of feeling pain and of suffering.

Darwin first described emotions in animals in 1872 ("The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals"), noting that certain facial expressions and body postures were seen in certain contexts. He also described the similarity between human and non-human emotions. This work was criticized for over a century by many who considered it "anthropomorphic." Animal emotions were considered "fuzzy"—falling outside the realm of "real science." Consequently, animal emotions were generally



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dismissed and not studied scientifically.

Over the past 50 years, scientists have explored how understanding animals' feelings can improve animal welfare. However, this required methods be developed to understand and study animal preference, frustration, stress, pain, play behavior and the importance of natural behavior. Despite our increased understanding of animals, discussion of animals' emotions is still often considered anthropomorphic. Professor Frans de Waal, an expert in primate behavior, considers the opposition to "anthropomorphism" in studies of animals to be a mistake. "I attribute opposition to [anthropomorphism] to a desire to keep animals at arm's length rather than concerns about scientific objectivity," he wrote.

Since, in general, humans are more likely to attribute sentience and emotion to animals that provide pleasure, recreation or companionship but not food, we as a society are more likely to attribute happiness or joy to our dogs but not our cows. Dogs can become "bored" but not cows; horses can become frustrated but not sows. Because an animal does not behave like a human does not mean that the animal does not feel or perceive her environment and the changes that occur in it. When we deny that animals have the capacity to feel, perceive and have emotions, we deny the science that does not fit our preconceived notions. 🐾