

Ethics and Animal Husbandry

In the past 30 years efficiency in converting plant foodstuffs into animal products has brought down prices of the products to consumers, but it has required disturbing changes in farming methods.

Animals are fed diets and drugs which promote fast growth and early reproduction. The associated metabolic changes and the fact that many animals are killed at the end of their fastest growth period result in a shorter life span. There has been a substantial increase in the number of poultry, pigs, calves and even adult cattle kept indoors. Since buildings are expensive, the farmer needs to house animals at a high density. They are kept individually in pens and cages, or tethered in rows or crowded in groups, with frequent physical contact. Some do not survive well in these conditions, and the lives of all are very different from those of animals kept in fields.

Most people were unaware of the changes in farm animal management until these were brought to their attention by small groups concerned about the morality of these practices. Many farmers felt some concern about the modern methods, but they did cut costs and hence were necessary if the farmer was to be competitive. Those not economically involved with farming could stand back and ask whether the reduced consumer prices and, sometimes, increased farmers' profits warranted the treatment to which the animals were subjected.

What indeed are the rights of these animals? One of the first people to pose this question publicly was Ruth Harrison, whose book *Animal Machines*, published in 1964, aroused the interest and indignation of many. In Britain, letters were written to newspapers and to Members of Parliament about farming practices and about the effects on farm staff of regularly inflicting pain or discomfort on animals. The British government responded by setting up an advisory committee which produced the Brambell Report in 1965. This included such recommendations as to allow animals basic freedoms, for example the freedom of movement. Some of these were taken into account in legislation and the resulting welfare codes of the ministry of agriculture.

Public concern about farm animal welfare was considerable in some other European countries such as Sweden and

southern Europe or in important farming countries such as the United States or Australia. Hence there has been legislation or government advice on welfare matters in some countries but not in others. In 1976, the European Convention on the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes required that animals be inspected daily and cared for, fed, watered, housed and given freedom of space and movement "appropriate to their physical and ethological needs." This was signed by 21 countries but has been ratified by only 12. Legislation in West Germany and welfare codes in Britain included reference to the Convention's requirements but such factors are not considered at all in many countries.

The issues which are of most concern at present are small battery cages for poultry, tethering and the use of small pens for calves and pigs, and various operations such as debeaking of poultry, tail-docking of piglets and lambs and castration. Is a battery cage whose floor measures 30 x 40cm

► The hens that produce the supermarket eggs are usually housed in small battery cages, often in dim light. The system pictured here involves manual feeding and egg collection, but in many large commercial units these are automatic. Sickness and injuries inflicted by pecking in the crowded conditions may go undetected for several days.

▼ Small-scale egg farms with free-ranging hens allow their birds much freedom of movement and the hens supplement their feed with nutrients that they find for themselves in the farmyard. It is argued that this gives their eggs a more natural appearance and flavor, and even makes them more nutritious, but none of these supposed advantages is proven (see p267). Some consumers are willing to seek out free range eggs, and pay a high price for them, simply out of disapproval for intensive methods.





(12 x 16 in) adequate accommodation for three laying hens?

Some people disagree with the consumption of any meat. Others believe that open-field systems for farm animals are better than indoor housing, a view not shared by those concerned about sheep freezing on hillsides in winter or starving on Australian rangeland during the dry season. The "welfare lobby" is not a uniform group for it includes extremists who would release all captive animals as well as people who are moderate in their demands and actions.

The questions raised in discussions of welfare are partly ethical, but concrete evidence about the responses of animals to particular treatments or housing conditions can be provided by physiological and behavioral monitoring. Animals in adverse conditions use several methods to try to cope with that adversity. The adrenal gland makes energy reserves available. Stereotyped behavior such as bar-biting may occur and morphine-like analgesics may be produced in the brain. The result of the behavior and of the chemical response is some alleviation of the adverse effects.

If the attempt at coping, using one or more of these responses, is unsuccessful, the animal may show reductions in disease resistance, growth rate and reproductive potential. It may also show abnormal behavior such as sucking the pen or damaging other individuals, for example by pecking out feathers in poultry or biting the tail region in pigs. The desirability of a rearing condition may be judged by the frequency and extent of such responses.

A different approach to assessing farm animals' welfare involves allowing animals to choose the characteristics of their surroundings. Such experiments demonstrate that most hens prefer a larger to a smaller cage and pigs prefer a pen with straw to one without. In order to interpret these results, however, the importance to the animal of the choice must be assessed.

Improved farm animal welfare can be achieved only if consumers accept higher prices and farmers accept lower profits. Such changes require government action, in the form of legislation or strongly worded advisory codes. Discussion between those concerned about farm animal welfare, farmers, scientists and government representatives is essential for change to be brought about effectively. It is improbable that a vegetarian will ever be satisfied by laws or agreed policies, but changes which are acceptable to the majority of the public are likely within a few years. DMB