

## Fifty years of animal welfare: a personal reflection

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In 2021 I will complete exactly 50 years of research, teaching and outreach related to animal welfare. Here is a brief summary of ten observations I would like to discuss with you.

1. *Concern about animals slowly evolved from a focus on “cruelty” to a focus on “animal welfare”.*

Historically, the main ethical concern about human treatment of animals was to avoid acts of cruelty. During the 1900s the use of animals – especially in food production and biomedical research – became increasingly large-scale and institutionalized, and ethical concern arose over how the quality of life of animals is affected by such human institutions. Beginning in the 1960s, the term “animal welfare” gradually became accepted as the language to express this new focus.

2. *A new field of science emerged.*

From the earliest discussions of animal welfare, people perceived that science could help clarify questions about animal welfare and identify ways to improve animal welfare. The new field of “animal welfare science” gradually emerged, slowly from the 1970s to the 1990s and more rapidly since 2000.

3. *Public attention to animal welfare has increased enormously.*

Starting mostly in the 1960s, animal welfare gradually grew as a focus of public concern and media attention. As one personal example, when we began teaching a course on animal welfare at my university in 1998, it attracted only 20 students; now we teach about ten courses related to animal welfare and hundreds of students are involved.

4. *An expanding range of organizations began to develop policy related to animal welfare.*

Historically animal welfare was promoted mostly by charitable organizations. In the 1970s and 1980s, governments became increasingly involved, sometimes by passing laws. The 1990s saw many large corporations setting animal welfare requirements for their suppliers. Since 2000 the issue has attracted action by major international agencies, notably the World

Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) which now sets global standards for animal welfare, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

*5. People's understanding of animal welfare has become increasingly sophisticated.*

When farm animal welfare was first discussed, many farmers, scientists and veterinarians argued that animal welfare is so closely linked to productivity that pursuit of fast growth and high reproduction is sufficient to ensure good animal welfare. As this view came to be rejected, scientists began proposing other ways to “measure” animal welfare (stress hormones, abnormal behaviour etc.), sometimes based on narrow definitions of welfare. Now many people accept that concern over animal welfare involves different elements including:

- that animals *function* well by being healthy and well nourished
- that animals *feel* well by not experiencing serious pain, fear and distress, and being able to enjoy life
- that animals should live a life that *suits their nature* including developing and using their cognitive abilities.

With this more complex view of animal welfare, the goal of the science is not to “measure” welfare as if it were a single property, but to identify and solve the diverse welfare problems that human actions create.

*6. It became accepted that science can help us understand “affective” states of animals.*

Although “affective” states like pain and fear are clearly important for animal welfare, many people claimed that science cannot study these private experiences of animals, and that attributing affective states to animals is merely “anthropomorphism”. Today, numerous methods are widely accepted as indicating affective states in animals, and there is a logical basis for generating scientific inferences about such states.

*7. More emphasis is being placed on “positive welfare” or “good lives” for animals.*

Initially, the main focus in animal welfare was on unpleasant conditions such as disease, pain, and hunger. Now we are seeing increased emphasis on “positive welfare” or “good lives” for animals, and research methods are being proposed to detect positive states such as enjoyment.

*8. We need to focus attention on how genetics influences animal welfare.*

The genetic make-up of animals is an important but neglected factor in their welfare. Breeding for extreme production in farm animals, and for extreme appearance traits in companion animals, is now recognized as causing major welfare problems. Breeding also creates opportunities to improve animal welfare: crossing breeds to solve in-breeding problems, breeding for better health in farm animals, and using natural or edited genetics to prevent welfare problems.

*9. We need to focus on the “human dimension” of animal welfare.*

Current animal welfare standards tend to emphasize the environments where animals are kept, but actual welfare outcomes remain highly variable. We now need more emphasis on how animal welfare is influenced by human factors such as the skill, attitudes, attentiveness, empathy, consistency and perhaps personality of animal caretakers.

*10. Ethical concern about animals needs to expand to include unintended consequences of human technology.*

Many types of technology created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are having appalling effects on free-living wildlife. Billions of birds are injured and killed each year by windows and tall office buildings. Billions of other vertebrates are injured and killed by cars and agricultural machinery. Pollution of water is harming aquatic animals in numbers too great to estimate, and climate change may be the greatest threat yet to the earth’s wildlife. We need a new ethic for animals that includes the unintended harms that we cause to animals by harming the natural systems of the planet. The conservation movement and the animal welfare movement need to work together on the many challenges that they share.