

What is “animal welfare” and why has it risen to be such a priority in the minds of so many people? How can we define animal welfare, measure and assess it, and what are some of the key horse welfare issues that we should be discussing and doing something about?

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Modern interest in the well-being of animals can be traced back to the late 1960s and growing public unease (particularly in the United Kingdom) about some of the ways in which farm animals were being housed and managed. This has, over time, led to changes in the way that many farm animal species are being raised. Public concern for the welfare of animals has now spread to most so-called developed countries around the world and concern has been extended to other domestic animals, including horses.

Common to all species is the fact that animal welfare is fundamentally about the quality of life that the animal experiences. It is a characteristic of the individual. It arises out of the fact that animals are sentient; they can experience pain and suffering, and they can also have positive experiences.

In some cases the state of well-being of an animal is quite obvious. Picture a horse outside on a cold winter night, low in body condition, with overgrown hooves from pure and simple neglect. Imagine also the abuse suffered by a horse being whipped and worked to the point of exhaustion in some much less developed country than our own. Neglect and abuse clearly compromise animal welfare. Now consider the much more pleasant sight of your horse galloping across an open field with its tail held high, and hear the nickering sounds it makes as it greets you coming towards the fence with something good in a pail. We may not know if

animals experience the same kind of “happiness” we do, but clearly they have positive experiences and they will seek these out.

The images just painted, and the welfare evaluations that go along with them, represent scenarios that are real, but extreme. Unfortunately in life there are many, many situations and uses of horses, and things we do to horses that are much more indistinct in terms of their overall impact on horse welfare. The same is true for assessing the welfare of other animals and as such, a lot of thinking has gone into helping to understand and build frameworks that can help us dialogue about these issues, and hopefully come to some mutual understanding on these topics, and help build consensus.

Animal welfare is really a subject that combines scientific evidence (facts: a matter of what is) with ethics (moral judgments: a matter of what ought to be).

Science and scientific methods can be used to collect facts and information about the well-being of horses. For example, we can systematically study the health of horses to determine rates of disease and to explore questions about whether horses may be healthier if kept in one kind of housing environment versus another (e.g., indoor housing versus pasture housing). Also related to health, we can examine mortality rates of horses, which can act as a rather crude but important indicator of welfare concerns (e.g., if horses used for a particular purpose live significantly shorter lives). It is also possible to use biological samples such as blood or feces to assess how much stress horses are experiencing and so it should be possible to compare the relative strain that horses experience under the different kinds of tasks that we demand of them (e.g., performance horses).

It is also possible to study the behaviour of horses to determine something about their well-being. Of all scientific disciplines, studying their behaviour may provide us with the most useful information to gauge and improve their welfare. For a first example, we could use careful and detailed observations of the behaviour of horses to determine the relative effectiveness of two different kinds of drugs to control pain after common surgeries such as castration. Next, in their normal day-to-day environment we could examine whether horses are behaving normally, or otherwise performing one of many abnormal behaviour patterns that we see in horses (e.g., cribbing, weaving, etc.). Quantifying these unusual behaviours can help us judge how abnormal their behaviour might be, and allow us to infer something about their welfare.

Ideally when trying to determine the welfare of horses we should collect evidence from as many of these scientific disciplines as possible. All of the forms of carefully collected scientific information described tell us about what is, and they provide us with critical evidence to help us gauge the well-being of horses and other species. Science is often called into useful service to

help us solve major quandaries.

The prime example most often cited in support of using multiple scientific measures to assess welfare goes as follows: If one were to use physiological measures of stress alone (e.g., blood cortisol levels) and compare them to normal baseline values, the well-being of a stallion covering a mare would be deemed to be absolutely unacceptable. Yet from observing the behaviour of stallions we know that, despite their high cortisol levels, they do not seem to find breeding aversive whatsoever, and in fact quite the opposite is true! This example also points out that sometimes our various indicators of welfare may not all come to the same conclusion.

The fact of the matter is that science alone cannot always put to rest all of our questions about the welfare of horses (or the welfare of any other species). In the final analysis, decisions about the quality of life that we provide for our animals (what ought to be) involves some degree of moral judgment. What we find acceptable in terms of our use of animals, and our approaches to using animals has been described and characterized by different ethical perspectives. So now let's talk a little about philosophy.

One animal ethics viewpoint that everyone will have heard of is the "Animal Rights" perspective. It is the most extreme in terms of speaking against the use of animals. Essentially this view asserts that animals have the same rights as humans, and that this includes the right to freedom from being subjected and used by humans, in any way. Thus, from an animal rights perspective, even keeping animals companions infringes on their rights, and is therefore unacceptable. So, even keeping a horse and not riding it would be against this philosophical perspective. Now recognize that someone with a predominantly animal rights perspective is certainly an advocate for the well-being of animals, they just happen to be of the opinion that it takes their absolute freedom to achieve quality of life for animals.

Another animal ethics perspective that many, many people heavily subscribe to is Utilitarianism. This point-of-view pronounces that we are justified in using animals as long as the total amount of good derived from that use, outweighs all of the negative consequences. It is, fundamentally, a cost-benefit analysis of our use of animals that takes into account consequences for the animal, for the user and for society at large. To start with a fairly benign example, some would judge that our use of horses for pleasure riding is a win-win situation, a real benefit to both horses and riders. The horse is (we trust) well fed and cared for. At the same time the rider also benefits from the enjoyment of actually providing that care to their animal, and also the rider benefits from spending time with their horse companion out on the trails.

Applying the utilitarian ethic to other uses of the horse can be much more challenging, but we need to be critical of our own uses of the horse to get anywhere with this kind of exercise. It does us no good to just pretend that everything is simple fine and dandy and straightforward. As an example, and accidents aside, horses certainly do become injured and even killed during their normal participation in certain equine events, and there is no denying that. For some people this is a deal-breaker. Some people maintain that our customary use of the horse should not cost the horse its life. Further some would argue that some components of the perceived benefit (e.g., the “entertainment value”) do not outweigh the risk of injury to the horses. But realize that the utilitarian perspective is not presented here to give any of us the answers, it is offered to help us understand the way that we consider and weigh out some of these welfare issues. Equally important is to use this to understand the perspective of others regarding horse welfare issues, including your fellow horsemen, and the general public.

A third ethical perspective on using animals is called the Relational view. By this point-of-view the appropriateness of our use of animals is evaluated in light of the human-animal relationship and the strength of the human-animal bond. For example, a person who primarily uses this perspective in evaluating the use of animals would not view all species equally; the welfare of companion animals (e.g., dogs) is likely to be given the highest value because we share our homes with them and many people consider their pets to be a part of the family. By contrast the relationship that we have with farm animals is usually a culinary one and so from this ethical perspective we may be less obligated to provide for their well-being.

It would be a small, small minority of people who might be completely oriented around just one of these ethical theories. In actual practice, when most of are grappling with animal welfare issues we will use a combination of the ethical theories presented (and perhaps a couple of others not discussed here). In fact, most of us even have some animal rights influence in our belief system regarding our use of animals. For example, if you believe that animals have the right not to be subjected to torture, then a part of you, however small, believes in some aspect of the animal rights ethic, even though you may be far from thinking humans and non-human animals share all of the same rights. Also, in evaluating different practices or different species one person’s weighting of the different ethical theories may change. The next time you are discussing a horse care and welfare issue, reflect upon which of the ethical theories the points you are making were derived from. And perhaps even more importantly, do the same thing when it comes to considering the points being raised by others, to help you understand where they are coming from, and what they value most.