



ARE CONSUMERS WILFULLY IGNORANT ABOUT ANIMAL WELFARE?

New study shows some consumers avoid the issue of animal welfare to prevent feelings of guilt whilst others trust farmers

It is a common notion that ignorance is bliss in many aspects of life, including food. Although much work has documented consumer attitudes towards farm animal welfare, few studies have questioned whether people even want to know how farm animals are raised.

Surveys that ask people if they care about the well-being of farm animals find that most people answer “yes”. However, a recent survey conducted in the USA has shown that “wilful ignorance” – whereby people deliberately avoid information – is a significant factor in our attitudes to meat consumption.

The survey measured expressions of wilful ignorance using the topic of pork production. Respondents were asked whether they wanted information on how pigs were raised and were given a choice between acquiring information or watching a blank screen. The survey then asked respondents why they chose wilful ignorance – ie they preferred not to know how the pigs were raised.

The results from the survey, which has just been published in the journal *Animal Welfare*, show that around one third of the 1,000 respondents were wilfully ignorant, preferring not to know how the pigs were raised. The survey also discovered, through a series of statements that respondents were asked to what extent they agreed, that 81% preferred not to know because they trusted the farmers and believed that they knew best when it came to raising animals whilst 38% agreed that they also felt it would make them feel guilty about eating pork.

Those who had chosen to see how the pigs were raised were asked to speculate on why some people didn't want to know. A majority said it was because people trusted the farmers, but an even larger majority said it was because the people who chose ignorance did so to avoid guilt.

One of the authors of the study, Dr F Bailey Norwood, Professor at Oklahoma State University, said: “*The level of animal welfare provided to livestock is directly determined by farm management practices – but those practices are influenced by consumer attitudes as expressed in the supermarket, to government and societal culture. This survey shows that some consumers avoid the issue to prevent feelings of guilt and this*

SCIENCE IN THE SERVICE OF ANIMAL WELFARE



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wilful ignorance by consumers has an impact – the less responsibility consumers accept for their food choices the lower the animal welfare. But the survey also shows that many consumers also trust farmers and if consumers are relatively uninformed about the relationship between farm management practices and animal well-being, allowing farmers discretion in how livestock are raised may be best for the animals. Only further research can discern whether greater wilful ignorance benefits or harms livestock.”

Further information

Material based upon work supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, US Department of Agriculture, forms part of a paper (*Are consumers wilfully ignorant about animal welfare?*) published in the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) journal *Animal Welfare*. Subscribers to the journal will find this paper in Volume 26 issue 4. The full abstract of the study can be read at UFAW's website <http://www.ufaw.org.uk/the-ufaw-journal/animal-welfare>.

If you wish to read the full paper, you can visit [ingentaconnect.com](http://www.ingentaconnect.com) to access the paper for \$25 (US) plus taxes. <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/ufaw/aw>

Those purchasing the paper or choosing to subscribe to the *Animal Welfare* journal will be supporting UFAW's work.

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The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) is an internationally recognised, independent scientific and educational animal welfare charity. It works to improve knowledge and understanding of animals' needs in order to achieve high standards of welfare for farm, companion, research, captive wild animals and those with which we interact in the wild.

UFAW improves animal welfare worldwide through its programme of awards, grants and scholarships; by educational initiatives, especially at university and college level; by providing information in books, videos, reports and in its scientific journal *Animal Welfare*; by providing expert advice to governments and others, including for legislation and 'best practice' guidelines and codes; and by working with animal keepers, scientists, vets, lawyers and all those who care about animals.

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