Is welfare all that matters? A discussion of what should be included in policy-making regarding animals

JW Yeates*,‡, H Röcklinsberg‡ and M Gjerris§

† RSPCA, Wilberforce Way, Southwater, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 9RS, UK
‡ Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Animal Environment and Health, Animal Ethics, Box 7068, 750 07 Uppsala, Sweden
§ Danish Centre for Bioethics and Risk Assessment Institute of Food and Resource Economics, Faculty of Life Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Rolighedsvej 25 DK, 1958 Frederiksberg C, Denmark

* Contact for correspondence and requests for reprints: James.Yeates@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract

Policy-making concerned with animals often includes human interests, such as economy, trade, environmental protection, disease control, species conservation etc. When it comes to the interests of the animals, such policy-making often makes use of the results of animal welfare science to provide assessments of ethically relevant concerns for animals. This has provided a scientific rigour that has helped to overcome controversies and allowed debates to move forward according to generally agreed methodologies. However, this focus can lead to policies leaving out other important issues relevant to animals. This can be considered as a problem of what is included in welfare science, or of what is included in policy. This suggests two possible solutions: expanding animal welfare science to address all ethical concerns about animals’ interests or widening the perspective considered in policy-making to encompass other important ethical concerns about animals than welfare. The latter appears the better option. This requires both a ‘philosophy of animal welfare science’, a ‘philosophy of decision-making about animals’, and greater transparency about what is included or excluded from both animal welfare science and the politics of animal policy.

Keywords: animal ethics, animal welfare, animal welfare science, death, integrity, policy-making

Introduction

In the last fifty years, many policies have been introduced that have regulated the use of domesticated non-human animals (Veissier et al 2008). Such policies may be partly based on concerns for human interests, such as economy, trade, environmental protection, disease control, species conservation, cultural traditions, religious beliefs and political expediencies (McGlone 2001; Millstone 2006). They may also be influenced by public pressure and media opinion.

But, some factors within the process of decision-making focus directly on concerns for non-human animals. These issues are not concerned with the instrumental value of animals to humans, but with some animal-based value. This might include ideas of ‘intrinsic value’, but typically focuses on the animals’ interests in terms of what is good for the animal.

The evaluation of animal-based factors is mostly, if not solely, informed by the results of animal welfare science (Moynagh 2000; Horgan & Gavinelli 2006). In addition, because of the importance of animal welfare science, animal welfare scientists often have a personal advisory role to policy-making, such as in drafting scientific reports and chairing committees (Veissier et al 2008).

Indeed, animal welfare research can even prompt the amendment of policies. The use of animal welfare science has consequently led to specific policies that have improved animal welfare standards (Millman et al 2004; Dawkins 2006, Blokhuis et al 2008). For example, the current EU Directive on slaughter was inspired by scientific opinions from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA 2004; European Commission 2009).

In order to ensure all human interests are appropriately addressed, policy-makers can draw on insights from various disciplines, including economics, law, politics, sociology and ethics. Most concerns for human interests are addressed by one or more of these disciplines, and the use of multiple disciplines can provide complementary insights. In contrast, the concern for non-human animals tends to be informed solely by animal welfare science as mentioned above. The risk of using a single discipline to provide information on an issue is that any issues not addressed by that discipline are then ignored in policy-making.

The aim of this paper is to consider how animal-focused policy-making might consider concerns for non-human animals not currently assessed within animal welfare