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Capybara (Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris) behaviour and welfare: implications for successful farming practices

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Abstract

Capybara (Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris) farming in Latin American countries was hampered at the outset by limited knowledge of species behaviour and inappropriate husbandry protocols, which resulted in low reproductive rates, lethal adult fights and consequent reduced well-being. As the peculiarities of capybara social behaviour are still ignored by many species' breeders, both in commercial or research centres, we aim here to provide a review of successful experiences in Brazil by evaluating a number of social behaviour issues that are directly associated with the species' welfare. We highlight special points on group composition and facilities needed, such as water tank and corral-trap structures, which may affect capybara health, productivity, and animal welfare. It has been shown that trying to form new aggregates by mixing adult or sub-adult animals obtained from different groups does not work. Conversely, we did not find a difference in the frequency with which mothers from the same group nurse their own young or those of other females. This knowledge may lead to successful trials for female adoption when necessary. In conclusion, capybara welfare is strongly linked to cohesion among animals. Additionally, assessment of vocal emissions is discussed as a potential, non-invasive measure to evaluate improvement in capybara handling procedures.

Keywords: *animal cohesion, animal welfare, captivity, farming, handling practices, social behaviour*