Commodifying animal welfare

H Buller*† and E Roe‡

† College of Life and Environmental Sciences, Geography, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter EX4 4RJ, UK
‡ Department of Geography and Environment, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of Southampton, Shackleton Building 44, University Road, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK
* Contact for correspondence and requests for reprints: H.Buller@exeter.ac.uk

Abstract

As the profile of farm animal welfare rises within food production chains, in response both to consumer demand and greater ethical engagement with the lives of animals, animal welfare is increasingly being commodified by various foodchain actors. That is to say that, over and above regulatory or assurance scheme compliance, welfare conditions and criteria are being used as a ‘value-added’ component or distinctive selling point for food products, brands or even particular manufacturers and retailers. We argue in this paper that such a commodification process has major implications both for the way in which farm animal welfare is defined and assessed (with greater emphasis being placed either on those welfare elements that lend themselves to commodification processes or on those that respond to consumer interpretations of what ‘good’ welfare might be at a particular time) and for the ways in which farm animal welfare is articulated and presented to food consumers as a component of product value or quality.

Keywords: animal welfare, commodification, consumption, free-range eggs, market, welfare assessment

Introduction

Animal welfare is increasingly being commodified — that is to say being turned into a commodity that can be sold as a product attribute in the market place. We are interested in how this process of commodification is modifying the manner in which animal welfare is defined and ultimately assessed. We are interested therefore in the politics of knowledge surrounding farm animal welfare: who says what welfare is and why and where, how do they say it and who are they saying it to?

We’d like to start with this quotation from John McInerney’s 2004 paper on Economics and Animal Welfare. He writes:

If resources in livestock production are to be adjusted to have an impact on animal welfare, that will only occur if that welfare change is perceived as an economic benefit [...] So it doesn’t matter whether we know what animal welfare actually is; we need only to know how to capture the responses to it within the framework of economic behavior (McInerney 2004; p 11).

In this section of his paper, McInerney makes clear how, from a purely economic perspective, human concern for farm animal welfare (in distinction from an animal’s own concern for its welfare) is founded in a primary consideration of human interest:

whether the welfare change is confirmed in a ‘scientific’ sense as actually beneficial to the animal is neither here nor there (p 11).

There are two key points here: the first is that there can be economic incentives for improving farm animal welfare, particularly when consumer responses to it can be ‘captured’ and thereby turned into active purchasing behaviour. The second point is that such economic incentives may actually change and alter what is conceived and known as (good) animal welfare. What welfare is depends increasingly on how we can market it, how it is commodified.

Debates in the field of farm animal welfare

Among the various debates going on in the field of farm animal welfare at the moment, two have particular relevance to our argument. The first of these concerns methods of welfare assessment and the balance between output-based measures, where an individual animal’s welfare is directly evaluated, and resource or input-based measures which seek to determine the potential for good or bad welfare to result from aspects of system design or husbandry practice (Webster 2005; FAWC 2009; Grandin 2010; Mullan et al 2011). The second major debate concerns information and the appropriate response to what are widely claimed as consumer demands for clearer information on welfare conditions at point of purchase (FAWC 2006; FAWF 2010). Although the former debate is most often conceived as a scientific and technical one, linked to critical issues of on-farm observational practice, verification and representativeness, the latter is largely regarded as a social and political one by retailers,