

Animal Welfare: Good for them, good for you

By T.L Magwirotu

I have worked with or around animals all my adult life. I grew up in rural Masvingo, and livestock has been part of my life since birth. However, the concept of animal welfare was something that I only seriously met when I started working at an animal research facility at the university.

So what is animal welfare and should it be a concern for the livestock farmer?

As a concept, animal welfare stems from the idea that animals are *sentient beings*, capable of feeling pain and emotion just like humans, and so should be treated as such. *That* may sound strange to you, but however way you see it, ensuring good animal welfare is actually good for the practical-oriented farmer/manager too.

The animal welfare movement originated in the 1960s UK when a journalist exposed the "horrifying" practices in butcheries. A government commission was set up to investigate and give recommendations. The result of all that history was that they gave us the basis of animal welfare regulations worldwide: the **5 Freedoms**.

So how do we ensure that our animals are in good welfare? Well, worry not. The 5 Freedoms (or their variations) can be used by livestock managers as a managerial tool/checklist.

Freedom to suitable environment, which does not expose them to extremes of temperature or bad weather. If animals are being kept in pens/rooms, ensure the room is big enough, well-ventilated and free from draughts. Environment should be rich/varied/stimulating.

Freedom from hunger: - Ensure that your animals get adequate quality and quantity of food. One obvious sign of poor welfare is emaciation/thinness. If you are an animal manager, body condition score is an important indicator of animal welfare.

Freedom 3: Freedom to express normal behaviour: Goats forage, pigs root, birds fly, rabbits burrow: it's in their nature. As a manager, ensure that whatever animal you keep and wherever you keep your animals, they can express their normal behaviour.

Freedom 4: Freedom from pain, suffering, injury and disease: Animals can get ill from time to time, just like humans. Welfare issues arise when we ignore or disregard animal pain. Animals should be attended promptly when ill, treated early for disease, and when the time for death comes, it should be quick and merciful.

Freedom 5: Freedom for company of its type: - Most animals are social beings, and their welfare is boosted when they can see, smell or touch others of the same species. Conversely, they should not be housed with strange or animals of different species.

Implications of poor animal welfare

Almost all governments have some animal welfare laws. Zimbabwe certainly does, for example: the Prevention of Cruelty to Animal Act; Animal Health Act (Animal Welfare Regulations); Scientific Animal Experiments Act (182). These laws safeguard animal welfare. But animal welfare is good for your farm business too. Here is how.

Poor welfare is a form of stress or it induces stress in your animal. Stressed animals do not perform well. They do not convert feed into meat efficiently; are prone to disease; may not come on heat; may suffer from or engage in neurotic/stereotypic behaviour e.g. tail biting, bar biting in pigs; egg-eating or savaging/killing the young ones; feather perking in overcrowded chickens; aggression etc.

So good welfare is good for your animals. It's good for you too. So get out your clipboard. Make a checklist. In the morning, do your rounds, judging your animal facility against the 5 freedoms. It's easy, it's handy and it's the right thing to do!

Till next time. Comment, like, give us some feedback.