ANIMAL WELFARE - ANIMAL RIGHTS
“PROTECTING ANIMALS OR A THREAT TO U.S. FOOD PRODUCTION AND OUR WAY OF LIFE?”

W. Roy Burris
Extension Professor in Animal and Food Sciences
University of Kentucky

Cattle producers are accustomed to dealing with many forms of adversity. Adversity generally comes in the form of blizzards, droughts, floods and economic conditions but now we must deal with animal activists who have their own opinions of what we can and cannot do as it relates to animal welfare and animal rights.

This is a relatively new experience for cattle producers who generally love their work, are fiercely independent and just want to be left alone. We care for, and about, animals which are under our care. Anyone of you could have chosen an easier lifestyle. Hauling hay and “breaking ice” just to keep your animals fed and watered, delivering a calf in February and March at midnight during an ice storm isn’t easy work. Nor is it done by people that don’t care about animals. Why would anyone question your interest in animal welfare? You keep your animals well-fed, vaccinated, parasite-free and free to graze on your well-managed pastures.

So what is the problem? This industry is attacked by people who have differing ideas about cattle production and ownership. Some are genuinely concerned about animal welfare but other activists question our right to own animals and want to convert everyone to a vegan lifestyle which includes not using any animal-derived products.

Since many consumers are now several generations removed from an agrarian lifestyle, they seemingly question and frequently oppose many of the things that are a “way of life” for us. The phrase “criticizing the farmer with your mouth full” comes to mind. So we are sometimes viewed as villains while our goal is to help feed everyone, maintain a rural lifestyle and make a living for our families.

Owning animals and consuming meat are not new ideas. Human-kind has been doing that for a while. Archaeologists suggest that prehistoric man consumed meat based upon bones of animals that have been found with indications of cutting on them and because “we see biological features often linked with meat eating, such as a decrease in tooth and gut size and an increase in body and brain size”.

Yet, the notion that we could care about animals and consume meat makes our position difficult to understand by some people. We believe that it is the “natural order of things” and deeply respect the process. But that position isn’t easily understood or accepted by some people.

**Animal Welfare vs. Animal Rights**

Let’s first deal with the definition of *animal welfare* and *animal rights* from the National Association for Biomedical Research. *Animal Welfare* is the desire to implement humane care and use standards for animals in research, testing, teaching and exhibition. Animal welfare is based on the belief that animals can contribute to human welfare by providing food, fiber, work, companionship, entertainment, or by serving biomedical research or education, and humans have a moral obligation to provide for well-being of animals. Animal welfare supports the use of animals by humans, and seeks to improve their treatment and well-being.

*Animal Rights* is based on the view that animals have similar, or the same rights as humans. Animal rights advocates do not distinguish between humans and animals. No matter how humane, animal rights proponents reject all animal use as exploitation, and therefore safe to ban all use of animals by humans.

Any sentient being (an animal that can sense pain) has the same rights as humans according to animal rights activists. The challenge isn’t just targeted to animal research alone but to anyone that “owns” animals. Organizations that are generally regarded as supporting animal rights are PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and HSUS (Humane Society of the United States).

The philosophies of *animal welfare* and *animal rights* are separated by irreconcilable differences and the enactment of animal welfare measures impedes the achievement of animal rights (Gary Francione, Rutgers School of Law). In my opinion, if the consuming public is genuinely concerned about animal welfare, we can live with that. But, if the argument is about equal rights for all sentients beings (animals that can sense pain) then we have irreconcilable differences and should focus on the majority of consumers which seem to be interested in animal welfare. Animal rights activists want to “blur the lines” between welfare and rights. They will work on humane care and legislation only until all animals can be removed from human use ([www.animal-rights.com/arpage.htm](http://www.animal-rights.com/arpage.htm)).

The top Animal Rights Issues (About.com Animal Rights – Doris Lin), which are arguing points for animal rights, are listed here along with their justification:

1. **Human over population** – “over population is the number one threat to wild and domestic animals worldwide.”
Comment: My view is that cattle are very important in supplying the world’s need for protein, energy and other nutrients. Cattle can utilize roughages and by-products that are not suitable for human use and can convert them into high quality food and other products. We need to look at more intensively managed grazing and increase the use of by-products in cattle feeds so that we don’t compete for feedgrains with the world population.

2. Property status of animals – “every animal use or abuse stems from the treatment of animals as property”.

Comment: There are efforts to change the legal status of animals from Personal Property to Living Property. We now have 3 legal classifications of property – Real Property, Personal Property and Intellectual Property but the desire is to have a new status for animals within the legal system (Favre.Marquette Law Review 93:1021) that would designate them as Living Property. This is based on the belief that animals have the following rights:

- Not to be held for prohibited uses
- Not to be harmed
- To be cared for
- To have living space
- To be properly owned
- To own property
- To enter into contracts
- To file tort claims (to sue humans)

Animal rights advocates generally fall into two categories:

- Abolitionists – wish to do away with ownership of any sentient beings – cannot keep, posses or use animals.

- Living property advocates – believe that it is ethically acceptable to have animals within a property status described above. Not brothers, not equals, but like children.

3. Veganism. “Veganism is more than a diet. It is about abstaining from all animal use and animal products, whether it’s meat, milk, leather, wool or silk”. It rejects the commodity status of sentient animals.

4. Factory Farming – “Although factory farming involves many cruel practices, it is not just those practices that are objectionable. The very use of animals and animal products for food is antithetical to animal rights.”
Comment: The term “factory farming” belies the fact that most farms are owned by farm families. However, this statement sums it up. It’s really about the very use of animals and animal products.

5. Humane meat – “While some animal protection organizations promote humane meat, others believe that the term is an oxymoron.”

6. Animal experimentation – “performing experiments on them (animals) violates their rights. And don’t expect the Animal Welfare Act to protect them.”

Comment: Animal experiments are conducted under strict guidelines of institutional control (Institution Animal Care and Use Committee) with protocol approval and frequent inspections.

7. Pets (companion animals) – “Some activists do oppose keeping pets, but no one wants to take your dog away from you.”

8. Hunting – Animal rights activists oppose killing of an animal for meat whether it is done in a slaughterhouse or forest.

What are we to do?

In my opinion, animal welfare is an issue that we constantly deal with. It is in our best interest to do so but that by itself is not enough. We must assure the consuming public that our animals are properly and humanely cared for. Programs will continue to evolve that certify that the practices and policies are complied with.

We can do this in our own operations by:

✓ Having adequate and properly designed handling facilities.
✓ Selecting docile animals that are easily “handled”.
✓ Cull cattle in a timely manner.
✓ Training cattle handlers and livestock haulers.
✓ Keep cattle properly immunized and healthy.
✓ Provide proper nutrition and health care at all times.

Animal welfare is an issue that we can and do, in fact, deal with at all times. Educational programs like Kentucky Master Cattleman, Master Stocker, Master Grazer, Professional Cattleman and Cattle Handling and Care Certification are offered by the University of Kentucky and the Kentucky Cattlemen’s Association, with funding through the Kentucky Agricultural Board, to keep our Kentucky cattlemen well-informed and certified as cattle producers that are well-trained and capable of providing acceptable care to our farm animals.
Animal rights activists are not just concerned about animal welfare but are firm in their belief that all sentient beings are equal. There’s not much common ground in our core beliefs. We aren’t going to change them and should recognize their right to choose a vegan lifestyle if they desire. However, we must fight to maintain our industry and lifestyle. Animal rights activists are passionate, well-funded and want to put you out of business, in my opinion. This activism may take the form of protests (burn labs, stage rallies, etc.) but that will likely scale back because they are becoming cautious about being seen as “extremists” and would rather be seen as compassionate people. The HSUS (Humane Society of the U.S.) and PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) position themselves as adopting stray animals but are (in my opinion, again) more concerning about equal rights for humans and animals and, therefore, spend time and money on reaching people that can influence without seeming to be “extreme”.

Those activities are targeted toward the younger population – especially school children – and include:

- Leafleting (providing their material)
- Humane Education Study
  - vegan outreach
  - “factory farm” awareness

In other words, we are under attack for welfare issues but the intent by some is to abolish animal ownership and have a vegan lifestyle for everyone.

**Summary**

We must continue to take good care of our animals and insure the consuming public that animal welfare is our concern too. We may have to participate in programs that certify that certain guidelines are met. Since there is strength in numbers and since the threat is very real, we should join, support and fund those organizations that work to protect our well-being and the existence of our farms – which are primarily family farms.

Cattle producers should, in my opinion, respect the rights of anyone to choose a vegan lifestyle if they desire. However, the vast majority of consumers choose to eat a variety of foods – including meats. We must educate the majority of the consumers about what we do and where we do it (on family farms). Activists will likely focus on school-age children, perhaps in classrooms, to change the attitudes of the public. We must accept this challenge and provide factual information about our industry and “debunk” the myth about everything coming from “factory farms”.

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Finally, don’t think that everyone is against you. Animal rights proponents, although vocal and well-funded, represent a small portion of the consuming public. A lot of people envy your rural lifestyle and wish they were doing the same things that you are. We need to assure them that we are producing beef humanely on family farms that are environmentally sustainable.