



Discussion Topic

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A monthly resource for the Community Action Groups of Michigan Farm Bureau

Animal rights vs. animal welfare: what's the difference?

In a society that seems to think anything is entitled to just about everything, perhaps it's appropriate to make the dark joke that before long, if some extremist groups have their way, your dog will get the right to vote.

That's fine if your dog agrees with you politically, but there's another extremist view that wants to set all dogs free, allow sows to run around in the woods and put animals - single cell or complex mammal - on equal standing with humanity.

The argument comes from two opposing belief systems. The Christian philosophy says the Creator gave man authority over other creatures, and creatures were given to man as a blessing, to love, to care for responsibly, and, when necessary, to eat. Humanist philosophy says any sentient being has inherent worth equal to man's that should result in rights equal to humanity's.

If left to itself, says the latter presupposition, nature would soon create harmony, and all the animals from moose to squirrel would join friendly alliances where there's no human influence to pollute, enslave or pursue filthy lucre. Subsistence existence is the best, in some human minds. Animals instinctively know better, oddly enough. Mice choose human houses over holes in nature's dead trees.

Farmers know better too, which is why the general public needs to understand the difference between animal rights and animal welfare just as clearly as farmers do.

Animal welfare is the farmers' business and, in most cases, the farmers' passion. It is the responsible farmer's obligation to provide the greatest comfort and safety for the animals in his or her care. To the responsible human, that includes food, water and shelter, and things that animals are incapable of developing.

Things such as antibiotics, planned breeding, preventive vaccinations, castration and dehorning leave animals better off than if they were set free to gouge each other with horns, procreate randomly with close relatives and spread disease wantonly throughout their populations. These are facts gleaned from generations of research, science and just plain common sense.

When it comes right down to it, animals have no rights. Americans and others in civilized nations have developed rights outlined in constitutions, and have chosen to obey the rule of law, which is the only way rights can be protected. If you doubt that logic, remember that the U.S. constitution grants unique rights to Americans that others don't enjoy, such as the "right" to bear arms or peaceably assemble or write and read newspaper articles.

Those things may be rights we enjoy, but they don't necessarily create welfare for us. We create our own welfare, absent government interference. Animals are incapable of that, except under extreme natural conditions. They subsist. Animals do not recognize the rule of law, and if left to themselves, would not be capable of providing their own welfare when the grass dies in the winter and the lakes freeze over; or when the prey they've survived on hits the crash part of the boom and bust cycle.

That leaves farmers to provide for animals' welfare. When they don't do that, their rights, under law, are taken away. Their rights will be replaced by welfare that comes from the prison system, paid for by the welfare of people who take responsibility for their own rights. The challenge, then, becomes one that farmers must embrace if they are to clear the vision of lawmakers and extremists who can't see that the line between rights and welfare has been blurred.

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QUESTIONS

- 1. How can your county Farm Bureau work to make lawmakers understand that farmers provide welfare for their animals, not rights?**
- 2. Why has the line been so blurred between animal rights and animal welfare? How can that be changed?**
- 3. How can our educational system be changed to help people understand the difference between animal rights and animal welfare?**