Science life: Discussion

THE ETHICS OF KEEPING FUR ANIMALS, THE ESTONIAN CONTEXT

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The discussion of the ethics of fur farming is currently important in Estonia, where the Estonian Parliament is due to make a judgement on the legality of farming animals for fur in the state. Although there is significant opposition among the local general population, and discussion in the popular and social media, there is little evidence of a coherent ethical reason why fur animals should not be farmed while we continue to permit the farming of other livestock animals. Ethical viewpoints of the rights and welfare of animals are presented here and these are contextualised with regard to fur farming and fur farming in Estonia in particular.

Key words: *ethics, fur farming, mink, chinchilla, blue fox.*

INTRODUCTION

It first should be understood that there is no consensus in animal welfare science on the ethics or desirability of keeping of fur animals. The two sides of the argument for farming mink have been discussed by Vinke (2001) and Nimon and Broom (1999), and foxes by Nimon and Broom (2001). Neither of course is there any consensus on the ethics of keeping of any groups of animals by humans. We shall consider below the current ethical ideologies underpinning the morality of the methods and practices of keeping of all production animals, and highlight the keeping of fur animals into these contexts. We have chosen to discuss the ethical views that are most relevant to this subject. It is important not to regard the keeping of fur animal in isolation from the keeping of other animals, especially in regard to the acceptance that fur animals are classified as farm animals, which is recognised in law both in the European Union (Anonymous, 1998) and the USA (Anonymous, 2006). Therefore, for each of the ethical positions discussed, the keeping of fur animals will be compared with the current practices of keeping farm animals in Estonia. The animals kept for fur in Estonia currently, and which are considered here, are: the European mink (*Mustela vison*), the chinchilla (*Chinchilla chinchilla*), the silver fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) which is regarded as a domesticated form of the red fox, and the blue, or arctic, fox (*Vulpes lagopus*).

ANIMAL RIGHTS

The position of the ethics of animal rights is that animal lives have a value above the value of their products. There is a range of views within this paradigm, and at the extreme end it is believed that animals should have the same rights

as human beings, the right not to be killed, the right not to be imprisoned. A detailed discussion of the concepts of animal rights by the leading philosopher of this view (Regan, 2001) and a refutation (Scroton, 2000) can be compared for those interested. At the more extreme end, this view prohibits the use of animals for any purpose involving restricting their liberty and slaughtering them. And this need not concern us; anyone with this view will be opposed to fur farming as well as opposed to all kinds of farming, dairy farming, pig farming and the use of animals for entertainment and medical purposes or other scientific experiments. At the other end of the range, the animal rights ethic may mean that it is acceptable to keep animals as long as they are treated with respect, and that they should not be harmed unnecessarily. So the question, at this milder end, is: can fur animals be kept in a way that respects them as individuals, which respects them above their value as a source of a pelt? We would say that this entirely depends on the attitude of the farmer, not on the livestock species. It becomes very difficult to envisage that it is so on farms where there are large numbers of animals, both fur farms and other livestock farms. Stockmen do not have time nor the ability to recognise individual animals in large groups, much less establish a relationship with them. However, on smaller farms of all types there is the potential for a relationship of respect between the stock-keeper and animals. On visits to fur farms in Estonia there was anecdotal evidence for this respect; one of the chinchilla farmers would absent herself from the slaughtering of animals as she found it upsetting. And it would not be upsetting if she only considered the animals as pelts. Farmers also knew of individual animals and their problems and personalities, and spoke to them. This is all evidence of a respect and value of the animals in their care beyond that of simply their value as pelts. In con-

clusion then, from an animal rights point of view, we can see no reason why the farming of animals for fur is any more offensive than the farming of other livestock animals.

UTILITARIANISM

In this view, which is probably the predominant view amongst animal welfare scientists, the benefits of keeping animals should be balanced against the adverse effects on the wellbeing of those animals. Regan (2001) has provided a critique of utilitarianism. In regard to the concept of utilitarianism and fur farming it is sometimes said, to us by students and laymen, and by thinkers in the field (Linzey, 2009), that fur farming is unnecessary as the benefits are not relevant; we do not need fur to survive. But this argument is really specious. Neither do we need eggs, milk, pork, or indeed leather or wool to survive. We are sure that a case could be made for the economic benefits of fur farming to outweigh the suffering of the animals, as they could for broiler chicken and dairy farming. In our view, the point of this view would be to consider how to improve the wellbeing of fur animals, to reduce their suffering as much as possible, while still enjoying the benefits of their production. In this regard, from observation of some Estonian fur farms, efforts have been made to improve the quality of their lives: nesting boxes provided for mink are used extensively, as were the shelter boards provided for the foxes and the enrichment items (branches for gnawing) in chinchilla and fox cages. From observations of farmed foxes, they did show abnormal behaviour, turning around and around, vocalising and leaping at the cage bars, but as this was at a time when they were preparing to be fed, this stressful behaviour at that time may well have been expected. It should be understood that other farm animals, like cows, pigs, and chickens, all often show abnormal behaviour, particularly in conventional husbandry systems, and particularly at feeding time. Farmers should be encouraged to consider ways in which to further improve their wellbeing, such as possibilities for the group housing of chinchillas and access to water for mink. Some ideas for improvements are included in the Welfur protocols for foxes (Anonymous, 2014) and for mink (Anonymous, 2013). To conclude, in my opinion this ethical viewpoint does not provide grounds for the banning of fur farming, unless we also propose the banning of other forms of farm animal production, but that we should, for all forms of farm production, strive to improve the welfare and quality of life of the animals in our care.

SPECIES INTEGRITY/CONSERVATION

In this view, we should not protect individual animals but the species as a whole. The species has value, we should not allow it to become extinct, and we should also preserve its integrity (Rollin, 2003). It is a respect for nature and disapproval of our genetic manipulation of animals. Proponents of this view consider genetic modification and selective breeding to be morally wrong. Thus, although the creation of the domesticated silver fox is offensive in respect to this

ethic, so does the breeding of pigs, cows, sheep and chickens. The argument could be made, and indeed is made, that keeping animals for farming purposes ensures the success of these species; there are far more chickens alive today than there would be if the jungle fowl had ever been farmed. Indeed, one of the fur animals under discussion, the chinchilla, is endangered in its native range, in the uplands of western South America. The other argument related to this view is that fur farming is wrong because of the risk of escaping animals interbreeding with or replacing native populations of animals, particularly the European mink. As far as American mink displacing European mink and the otter are concerned, the horse has already bolted, and it is too late. In any case, the populations of species in the Estonian countryside are not static. The racoon dog and the wild boar are also relatively recent introductions to the fauna of our landscape. We share a land border with other countries, and the movement of animals across this border is more likely to be a threat to our native populations. It should also be noted that escape of other conventional and exotic livestock from farms could have impact on wild populations (domestic pigs carrying disease and hybridity to wild boar for example). In our view, if the animals are kept secure from escape, as should all farm livestock, there should be no further threat from their continued production.

TELOS

This is the view that animals should be allowed to behave in the ways that they have evolved to behave, and that if they are not allowed to behave in these ways they are frustrated and can suffer as a consequence of this frustrated motivation. Pigs should be kept in such a way that they are allowed to be pig-like and do piggy things. It is clear that farmed chinchilla are not able to climb and jump, farmed mink are not able to swim and chase fish and farmed foxes are not able to run and chase prey. But it is also equally clear that chickens in a broiler house, pigs on a slatted floor and dairy cows housed indoors are likewise unable to perform many of their natural behaviours; behaviours that we know they are motivated to perform. It is difficult to quantify how distressing it is for animals to be unable to carry out these normal behaviours. However, in our view we should allow them to behave as naturally as possible. Much has been made of the fact that fur animals are not domesticated (at least they are only recently domesticated) and are therefore more vulnerable to restrictions on their natural behaviour patterns. However, many years ago Stolba and Wood-Gush (1981) showed that, despite thousands of years of domestication, pigs will show natural wild pig type behaviours if they are given the opportunity to do so, and Jensen (1988) found that this included nesting behaviour. This is not to say that we should not make every effort to allow natural behaviours for fur animals, but we should be aware that domesticated animals have similar drives and frustrations to those of wild or less-domesticated animals. Keeping chickens, pigs, and dairy cows in intensive conditions also restricts the expression of their behavioural motivations.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that there is much opposition to fur farming among the general public and activists. But this does not seem to be based on any clear and unambiguous ethical viewpoints, but perhaps only from the rather weak position of not harming furry animals with appealing faces, an ethic of niceness. However, this is insupportable. It is our contention that not one of the ethical views described allows us to consider fur farming to be exclusively wrong, ethically or morally, when compared with current systems of livestock production. We therefore suggest that there is no ethical reason to exclusively ban fur farming.

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Rakstā apskatīti kažokzvēru audzēšanas ētiskie aspekti Igaunijā, salīdzinot ar pasaules pieredzi.