Changes in Animal Welfare Views in New Zealand: Responding to Global Change

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Abstract
Consumer action is leading to increasing debate over on-farm activities in New Zealand. Both animal welfare activists and government organizations frequently refer to the importance of welfare standards in order to secure overseas markets, as well as in response to local concerns. This article explores rural and urban people's views of welfare of animals kept on farms for commercial purposes in response to a 2008 survey commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. It compares and contrasts these recent findings with those of an earlier (1994) survey, to demonstrate how understanding of—and the impetus for—changing farm practices have developed. The article also looks at the global context of the animal welfare issue and discusses how overseas trends impact the New Zealand situation. The view that animal welfare is purely about physical well-being is among those challenged at home and abroad, and farmers are now forced to defend and amend industry standards.

Keywords
animal welfare, farm animals, perception surveys, social change, New Zealand

Introduction: Changes in Public Perception and Governance of Farming
Increasing sensitivity to changing views of animals on farms by both farm people and members of the public will be examined through reanalysis of selected data from separate surveys implemented in 1994 and 2008. Overall, New Zealand is typical of the Western countries referred to by Buller and Morris when they describe the hybrid features of farm animals: “[W]hile post-modernity has encouraged us to see the individuality and subjectivity of non-humans as beings, modernity continues to put them on our plates as meat” (Buller & Morris, 2003, p. 217). New Zealand is less typical in the degree to which the importance of its export of animal products makes it sensitive to overseas trends. Factory farming and global trade in live animals provoked heightened concerns about the experience of farmed animals over fifty years...
ago in the United Kingdom (Harrison, 1964); but in New Zealand, where relationships with farm animals are influenced by the importance of pastoral production to the economy, the dominant perception has been that most farm animals live healthy lives in extensive farming systems. Those who challenge this view can feel marginalized (Potts & White, 2008). Research into perceptions of farm animal welfare funded jointly by the Agricultural and Marketing Research and Development Trust (AGMARDT) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) (Matthews, Loveridge, & Guerin, 1994) and by MAF alone in 2008 (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry & UMR Research, 2008a) suggests perceptions are becoming more critical in response to ongoing campaigns by welfare activists and the ongoing involvement of government in regulation of farm production.

Early in the 1990s, activities promoting animal welfare in New Zealand were driven “from the top” by exporters who were dealing with overseas markets where consumer concern over the treatment of animals was rapidly growing (New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries & the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1993). Live animal exports and severe weather during lambing in the South Island in 1992 created enough public anxiety overseas for the backwash to hit New Zealand. Concerns that have driven high-profile campaigns by American or British activists (Rifkin, 1992; Noske, 1989) have been indirectly influential in New Zealand, and those scientists and policy makers with international links, who specialize in animal welfare, have encouraged sensitivity to public concerns (Mellor & Bayvel, 2008; Smith 1998). Public awareness has also been raised by nongovernmental organizations; for example, the Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RNZSPCA), and media reports have followed the issue of animal welfare with increasing regularity.

Government policy was at the center of action that culminated in new legislation, the Animal Welfare Act 1999, which was claimed as “world leading” in parliamentary debate (Hansard, 1999). The Act differentiates core values from “good practices” that guide the ongoing treatment of animals and are managed by regulations and Codes of Welfare. Farmers, the RNZSPCA, and other stakeholders are represented on two committees that oversee guidelines for farm animals and animals used in research, teaching, and circuses; and for companion and other animals. Public submissions on the guidelines are also considered.

The 1990s was a period of upheaval in New Zealand farming, as the industry adjusted to the neoliberal reforms that left it one of the least government subsidized in the developed world. As the government withdrew various financial supports, it moved to what has been called the reregulation of farming, with greater attention to the market and new modes of governance. With
industry increasingly self-regulating, the government role is to “facilitate rather than support or direct” (Le Heron & Roche, 1999, pp. 204-5). For example, the Animal Products Act, which introduced manufacturer control over the means of achieving required quality standards through Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) risk management systems, was enacted in the same year (Bain, 2001). Benchmarks for environmental or animal welfare quality assurance are often promoted or enforced by processors through contacts with farmers (Gray & Le Heron, 2010; Bain, 2001). Analyzing Fonterra, New Zealand’s largest processor of farm products and the world’s ninth-largest producer of milk, Gray and Le Heron (2010) argue “that Fonterra has come to know its New Zealand dairy space differently because of growing awareness of world environmental, food safety, nutritional, animal welfare and other issues” (p. 11). Local concern about the environmental impacts of dairying does exist. The impact of global trends on farming is regularly reported to the public by government as well as industry (Le Heron & Roche, 1999).

Many animal welfare initiatives were funded directly or indirectly by government in the lead-up to the passing of the Animal Welfare Act 1999 (Mellor & Bayvel, 2008; Smith, 1998). David Mellor and David Bayvel, themselves key players in developments in infrastructure to support farm animal welfare, confirm the top-down modus operandi “instigated by a number of forward-looking individuals who recognised the value of having animal welfare well managed and regulated at a national level and who displayed the resolve to see that vision realised” (Mellor & Bayvel, 2008, p. 314). In a review of New Zealand veterinarians’ role in animal welfare, Smith (1998) questions the rationality of some pro-welfare organizations but praises dialogue: “Attacks on research premises have been prevented, at least on one occasion, where in-house personnel have taken the time to explain the exact nature of the work using animals, the cost-benefit analysis and the nature of the existing Animal Ethics Committee system” (Smith, 1998, p. 218). There is a general emphasis in publications by MAF and veterinarians that consensus can and should be achieved, supported by bureaucratic systems. Reregulation in New Zealand is achieved by an audit culture, in which hybrid systems evolve out of conflict and negotiation between new social movements, farmers and commercial bodies, resulting in new certification systems (Campbell, 2006). Quality Assurance schemes such as Freedom Foods have been adopted in New Zealand and are publicized by local animal welfare organizations (RNZSPCA, 2001). Europe is only one of New Zealand’s markets, but it is an influential one in terms of local practice.

In Europe, Farm Quality Assurance schemes are an important factor in maintaining public awareness of welfare issues, even though people do not
always buy the more expensive products that have been audited by these schemes. They give people “Common vocabularies that permit mobilisation of diverse social and political actors” (Miele, Murdoch, & Roe, 2005, p. 171).

The New Zealand Survey Data and Its Context

Comparing data from separate surveys required reanalysis of the data, which consists of answers to two open-ended questions that were similar but not exactly the same. The 1994 data is in response to a question about concerns for farm animals, while the 2008 data is in response to a question about their situations. In 1994 all participants were asked if they had concerns, but in 2008 only people who had awarded a low score to farmers on animal welfare in a previous question were asked about animals’ situations. The responses were sufficiently similar for a comparison to be made (see Figure 2). The 1994 responses were recoded by the researcher and converted to percentages to make them more comparable with the 2008 data, which was only available to the researcher in published form. The resulting comparison is only indicative but is of interest because of the dearth of good-quality longitudinal data in this field. Further statistical analysis was not appropriate, given the different basis of the samples. The methodological implications of the comparison are better understood if the context of their design is elucidated.

The 1994 Data

The 1994 survey was commissioned in anticipation of the proposed Animal Welfare Act. It asked farmers, veterinarians, MAF employees (called Livestock Officers) who visit farms and have an educational role related to farm animals, and the general public an open question eliciting concerns: “Have you ever had any concerns about the way farm animals are typically treated in New Zealand?” In addition, each group was asked a set of questions about specific farming practices and the role of regulatory, advisory, and enforcement agencies in carrying out these functions. Participants were contacted by telephone, and 1,400 members of the public and 505 farmers responded. See Matthews, Loveridge, and Guerin (1994) and Loveridge (2011) for further details about the survey.

Results of the 1994 survey showed that the people most likely to be concerned about farm animal welfare were veterinarians (60%) and Livestock Officers (50%), followed by the general public (41%). Farmers were least likely to be concerned (34%). Only the most common concerns are presented, and
percentages are based on the number of comments rather than the number of people who made them (Matthews et al., 1994). There were significant differences in the nature of the concerns voiced. Farmers were more concerned about what might be seen as abusive in a “traditional” sense—for example, neglect, mistreatment, and inadequate nutrition. Members of the public were most concerned about neglect, mistreatment, and constraint, particularly of hens. All participants were asked whether penning or caging animals indoors was an issue, and close to a third of the 77% of the members of the public who thought it was an issue answered that it was unnatural. Close to a third of the 54% of farmers who thought it was an issue also said it was unnatural (Matthews et al., 1994). Although few members of the public would have heard about the five freedoms developed by the Farm Animal Welfare Council after the Brambell Report of 1965 (in brief, freedom from (1) hunger and thirst; (2) discomfort; (3) pain, injury, and disease; (4) freedom to express normal behaviors; and (5) freedom from fear and distress), these concepts certainly resonate with their “common sense” ethics.

All participants, across all the groups, had noticed widespread media coverage concerning the welfare of caged hens. This translated into most concern from the public (Matthews et al., 1994). Members of the farming and servicing sectors often reported they had changed their practices with regards to animal welfare, but this was as much related to improving production as it was to improving the general humaneness of animal care—although survey research was unable to disentangle how these might interact. Younger people, white-collar workers, women (on some issues) and people who had donated to welfare causes were more likely to express concerns (Matthews et al., 1994).

Change in the New Zealand Context between 1994 and 2008

In 1994, the transport Code of Welfare was in the media, and New Zealand was still engaged in live sheep exports. Although the last major disaster for New Zealand sheep transported by sea was in 1990, there has been intermittent publicity about overseas disasters (ACIL Tasman, 2009), and this may have contributed to the public’s view of animal welfare. Between 1994 and 2008, there has been increased activity by animal welfare organizations and more media coverage. And yet, although the RNZSPCA has been campaigning about conditions of laying hens for nearly two decades, the numbers of people purchasing eggs from noncaged hens comprises a relatively small proportion of the market sector. In the 1994 survey, 8% of respondents stated they bought free-range eggs, which was in line with the approximate quantity of eggs purchased from noncage systems (Matthews et al., 1994). Production
of free-range and barn eggs is still currently only 11% of all those consumed by individuals and in processed food. Food-purchasing decisions are a complex mixture of routine, food preparation, knowledge, and motivation to have an impact through consumption and supply. In New Zealand, consumer activism is influenced by the views of overseas celebrity cooks such as Jamie Oliver (Hickman, 2008). “Currently, there is little knowledge about how configurations of supply and communication are connected to (i.e. influencing and being influenced by) consumer attitudes and demand for ‘animal friendly’ food products” (Kjærnes, Bock, Roe, & Roex, 2008, p. 7).

The use of film footage in various campaigns by newer and smaller activist groups may be having far more impact than the posters, small demonstrations, and newspaper advertisements of the early 1990s (Armstrong, 2007). While all activists are campaigning against systems in which the animals are highly constrained, small groups have more freedom to mount radical campaigns. Furthermore, they don’t have the RNZSPCA’s strong links to policy infrastructure. Groups based in New Zealand are all influenced by the actions and goals of international organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) (Bagshaw, Matthews, & Loveridge, 2006). Just over one-third of 157 self-selected respondents to Potts and White’s detailed self-completion survey had farm experience. It was clear that some participants considered current farming practices still to be a challenge to New Zealand’s “clean and green” identity (Potts & White, 2008, pp. 342-3).

The 2008 Data

Concerns about New Zealand’s perceived rural-urban divide prompted MAF to commission UMR Research to produce Beliefs & Values Research: Urban and Rural Perspectives of the Primary Sector in 2008. The inclusion of three questions on perceptions of the treatment of farm animals out of 28 substantive questions signaled that this issue is not just of concern to exporters but is also coloring relationships within New Zealand. The survey also asked several questions about quality of food production and environmental impacts (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry & UMR Research, 2008a). As part of its inquiry into urban and rural relationships, the MAF study conceptualizes people as consumers of farm produce and of a desirable rural environment, and at least potentially, as members of a social movement referencing both overseas and local activities and contexts. Unfortunately, although a number of questions were asked about the regulation of environmental impacts, similar questions were not asked about animal welfare in 2008. The questions reflect local priorities, as opposed to those of the overseas consumer, who is
probably more concerned about the quality of the product than the impact of its production in New Zealand.

The introduction to the *Beliefs and Values* survey states that it aims to promote support for the rural sector in an era when policy and regulation is said to be “largely driven by the perspectives of urban people” (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry & UMR Research, 2008a, p. 5). This view was clearly expressed by Federated Farmers’ President Charlie Pedersen before the survey when he said, “Food producers are on the brink of feeling unloved and unwanted in this country” (Pedersen, 2008); and “The rest of the community…thinks because we don’t make up a great number of people, we are expendable” (Pedersen in Freeman, 2006). Both urban and rural residents responded, and in sufficiently large numbers to identify distinctive subgroups clustered around time spent on farms or in rural areas, as well as core socio-economic indicators (gender, education, age) (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry & UMR Research, 2008a, Appendix XI). Computer-assisted telephone interviewing was used with a rural sample of 635 people and an urban group of 608. In preparation for the telephone survey of rural and urban people, six focus groups (three rural) were carried out and quotes from these provide context for interpreting the tables (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry & UMR Research, 2008a). Over three-quarters of the rural sample had worked in the farm sector at some stage of their lives.

To map pressure points, the UMR researchers applied cluster analysis to the socio-economic data and divided the rural and urban samples into four categories of similar size, which indicated degrees of association with urban and rural interests (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry & UMR Research, 2008a; 2008c). Rural advocates tend to have strong ties or to live in rural New Zealand and have fewer concerns about the impact of farming on the environment. Rurally unconnected advocates are also positive toward pastoral farming, although they have few social contacts with rural New Zealand. Provincial cynics are less positive about farming but less likely to press for change than the rurally unconnected cynics.

In 2008, participants were asked “Using a scale of 1-5…how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements”:

- In general farmed animals that live outside are healthier and have a better life
- Most farmers treat their animals well
- Most farmers put caring for animals ahead of making money
Aggregate scores of people in the most and least connected categories did show differences in their views on farmers’ relationship with their animals when the mean scores were calculated (See Figure 1). On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 5 = strongly agreed to the statement), most agreed. Differences in opinion on animals living outside were smallest, with urban people with least rural connection having only an average score 0.5 lower than that of the highly connected rural subgroup. The difference on whether most farmers treat their animals well was slightly larger at 0.89, and the largest difference was on putting caring for animals ahead of money at 1.1. All groups were less likely to accept that farmers put caring for animals ahead of money than that most farmers treat their animals well. Rural people’s views were less diverse than those of urban people (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry & UMR Research, 2008a).

Rural people and members of the general public who disagreed that “most farmers treat their animals well” and that they put “caring ahead of money” were asked about the situations in which they thought farm animals were not
treated well. The list of “situations” from 2008 is compared to the list of concerns from 1994 in Figure 2.

Comparison of the Open-Ended Questions in the 1994 and 2008 Surveys

Both data sets were based on responses to open-ended questions, which only some participants answered. In 1994 there were 207 comments recorded from 41% of members of the public with concerns, while in 2008 there were 136 comments from the 25% of urban people who disagreed with farmer management styles. In 1994 there were 168 comments coded from the 34% of farmers who expressed concerns compared with 131 comments from the 20% of members of the rural sample of 635 who disagreed with farmer management styles in 2008. Samples for the comparison between farmers of 1994 and rural people of 2008 are not as well matched as for the general public. The data cannot be generalized to the population as a whole but indicate a trend deserving further attention.

All categories show some degree of difference over time (see Figure 2). Confinement of poultry shows proportionally less difference than confinement of pigs, which may be because campaigning for pigs has had a lower profile until recently, and the 1994 baseline was lower. In 2008 there are also relatively more comments about the role of the media and of smallholders, and there is relatively less consideration given to the “traditional” concerns of physical mistreatment and neglect, as opposed to behavioral restriction.

Common farm practices—for example, docking tails, etc.—are now increasingly identified as ways in which animals are not treated well. Concerns about dogs were not elicited by the 2008 question but were substantial in 1994, perhaps because sheep farming was more prominent then. Providing adequate health care, food, water, and shelter show less change.

Urban change between 1994 and 2008 shows that the greatest shift in concern is from general mistreatment, including of dogs, to confinement of pigs and poultry. The changes are summarized in Table One, which consists of the difference in percentages resulting from the subtraction of the second category from the first. As with the general public, the underlying trend was for rural people to question self-selected “normal” farm practices more than in 1994, except for provision of sufficient food and water.

There are some notable differences between public/urban and the farm/rural samples in the way they have changed over time. Concern on the part of
the rural groups about general mistreatment and neglect has decreased more than for the urban groups, and concern about livestock injured by farming practices has increased more than for the urban groups (see Table 1). Opinion on provision of food and water also differed more than for the general public, perhaps because of drought conditions and other uncertainties of which farmers were more aware.

In general views have changed over time, but urban-rural differences have not disappeared; in several areas they have increased. All groups expressed high rates of concern over self-selected normal farming practices, but these are now of more concern to the rural rather than the public sample. The results can only be indicative because of differences in the questions and samples. With pig farming, while relative concern has increased, the urban-rural gap has narrowed. Responses regarding insufficient food and water and inhumane transport show less concern over time but a slightly greater rural shift. Freedom to
move around was given higher value, and if the low baseline for pigs is taken into account, the gap between farm and rural views appears to be closing on this issue.

**Discussion**

Table 1 confirms that, overall, concern with some common management practices and with systems that confine animals is responding to local and global attention. Given that the proportion of participants in the 1994 survey who questioned confinement systems in answer to a structured question with a prompt was much larger than the number who identified this as a problem
in the open-ended question, it is likely that the increase in concern about confinement would be more widespread if the original questions were replicated. Kendall, Lobao, and Sharp (2006) note the lack of standardized questions in studies of opinions in other countries. Although understanding of on-farm human-animal relationships within different contexts is growing, there is a lack of research analyzing change over time—either qualitative or quantitative—and cross-national comparison is also difficult. In 1994, 58% of the New Zealand public agreed that stricter regulation of the treatment of farm animals was needed and, in 2003, 62% of a Gallup survey of Americans agreed that they supported passing strict laws concerning the treatment of farm animals (Moore, 2003; Matthews et al., 1994). Again, the questions are not exactly the same, but they are indicative that the views of the New Zealand public may be similar to those held in other countries.

Public perceptions are influenced by a mix of activist initiatives; government discourse; market-oriented organizations—such as Fonterra—that are pushing farmers to improve standards; media attention to animal stories; and organizations such as Federated Farmers, whose aim is to protect farmers where they consider growing public and other pressure to be unfair. Local supermarkets are less influential in New Zealand than big overseas chains (Tanaka & Ransome, 2008). As in Europe (Kjærnes et al., 2008), animal welfare is an important element that is often bundled with other concerns about quality (Gray & Le Heron, 2010). It would be simplistic to assume that market forces are all that need to be understood, but the market dynamic is captured in the six focus groups conducted by UMR Research as people grapple with the dynamics of business versus care (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry & UMR Research, 2008). Examples of comments portraying this tension between profit and animal welfare are:

If you're doing it properly, the idea is to keep your stock in the best condition and make the most money. Isn't that how it's got to be? I don't think there is a conflict. (Canterbury, rural, female)

I think there is a conflict between corporate agriculture and the humane treatment of animals. By that, I mean farms run as a business. Corporates only have one law—make a profit. (Christchurch, urban, male)

And that's going to become more important too with the welfare of animals, with overseas people, because there's nothing worse than people go down the road and they see on a cold day all these cows under the hedge shivering and standing in mud, I think that's going to be a big no-no soon. (Hawera, rural, male)

I think, in general terms, most farmers are very concerned for their animals' welfare but—especially poultry farmers—I don't think of poultry farmers being like that,
especially the battery hens. [So they’re going for productivity?] Yes. (Auckland, opinion leaders, female)

European farmers operate in a very different environment, with the largest average herd size in the United Kingdom at 82, compared with New Zealand’s average of 336, and an array of quality assurance schemes to join (Livestock Improvement Corporation, 2009). Nonetheless, their response to consumer pressures parallels New Zealand concerns—they are worried about the distrust of farmers by consumers that led to quality assurance schemes being necessary. “Many farmers distrust the processing industry and retailers, and doubt if their engagement in animal welfare is really more than window dressing” (Kjærnes et al., 2008, p. 253). As in New Zealand, environmental concerns were stronger than animal welfare ones—and those farmers involved in animal welfare ones, as opposed to general quality-related schemes, had strong ethical motivations. Market forces were seen as providing an innovative environment with distinct advantages for farm animals. Although the costs of joining such schemes were seen as high by farmers in Europe and New Zealand, they all hoped for marketing advantages (Loveridge, 2011; Kjærnes et al., 2008). The audit culture identified by Campbell, evolving out of conflict and negotiation between competing interests is evident (Campbell, 2006).

Conclusion

New Zealand appears to be following European trends, although these surveys are not exactly comparable to those performed overseas, and the pace of change in New Zealand may differ. However, the context is illuminating. New Zealand provides a unique opportunity to study the intersection of local and global influences, where increasing concern over the nature of farming, as well as over extreme examples of abuse, is in line with other countries (Gray & Le Heron, 2010). The 1994 survey focused on treatment of animals and its regulation, identifying major differences within its urban constituency, as well as between general public respondents and the farm sector (Matthews et al., 1994). It was organized around the idea that changes in legislation should be in step with public opinion, that farmers needed to show they were or could be progressive, and that public views could be “managed.” In 1994 farm people were most concerned about lack of food and water, then general mistreatment, followed by self-selected normal farming practices. The public was far more concerned about the confinement of poultry and selected normal farming practices than any other problems. Concern about the treatment of pigs followed campaigns around this issue. The 2008 survey was oriented around the
notion of the “consumer” rather than the “public.” Solutions to problems were to be provided by changes in marketing and quality control rather than new legislation. It lacks the specifics of the 1994 study, and cannot contribute to understanding of how the regulatory environment is experienced, but a repeat of the original questions seems likely to reveal increased concern. Neither does the 2008 survey share the wide-ranging orientation toward consumption that recent European studies demonstrate. Its primary goal was to manage the sense of pressure experienced by rural people, rather than explore opportunities to support animal welfare through increased understanding of how the market operates. Rural people were now most concerned about selected normal farming practices, followed by concern about lack of food and water and poultry, with pigs a distant fourth, though concern had grown considerably. Questions on the environment, which is a higher-profile local issue compared with animal welfare, reflect a hybrid audit culture of conflict negotiation, regulation, and market solutions; replicating all the questions for animal welfare would have provided welcome insight (Campbell, 2006).

Despite the methodological problems, in the absence of rigorous comparative work as identified by Kendall et al. (2006), the tantalizing possibility of comparing change over time raised by the 2008 study was too good to forego. The result has transmuted into a more general review of the New Zealand scene, which provides a useful starting point for future research and understanding.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to Natalie Edwards (Massey University) and Leslie Hunt (Agribusiness and Economics Research Unit, Lincoln University) and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and critiques. Any errors or omissions remain my responsibility.

Notes

1. A review of The New Zealand Farmer in 1994, when the SPCA began a campaign against battery hens, found seven articles on public perception of farming practices. A NINX Parliamentary Newspaper Index search of newspapers found reports of campaigns against confined pig and poultry farming, live sheep export, and articles on Codes of Welfare.

2. These figures are not strictly comparable, as the 1994 ones did not include processed eggs, but few of these are free-range (Egg Producers Federation of New Zealand, 2010).

3. Organizations such as Open Rescue will enter properties without permission (The Press, 2007). SAFE has run the highest-profile campaign on the confinement of pigs for many years (SAFE, 2010).
References


