

Animal Welfare – Integral to Research or an Afterthought?

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Rabbits are not a loved Australian icon! The strong negative attitudes of agricultural interests, and these views then reflected by the community and its political leaders, has meant that the treatment of rabbits is not related to their sentience at all. The cost to the rabbits is currently horrendous; rabbits, literally millions of individuals, are currently killed by a number of methods including steel jaw traps, shooting, poisoning, gassing and warren destruction, myxomatosis and by the release of the rabbit calicivirus disease. All these methods cause suffering, but that suffering is not often acknowledged.

Not surprisingly, our strong policy and view is that where it is considered necessary to remove any animal from an environment, this should be done by humane and non-lethal measures. A recent substantial study of the domestic (and stray/wild) cat statistics coming into Australian shelters has reinforced the logic of the fertility control approach and strengthened our support (figures can be provided). If lethal methods are to be used/developed though, in the interim, they must not cause pain or stress.

Legal protection for ‘mislocated’ animals (our preferred term) is almost completely lacking i.e. definitions of ‘**animal**’ in State/Territory animal welfare statutes indicates ‘any live vertebrate animals other than a human being’ (or similar), but then go on to specifically exempt whole classes of animals from the full protection (farm animals, commercially-caught fish and ‘ferals’ etc). Even the National code of practice for research animals appears to accommodate an expectation that Animal Ethics Committees may treat ‘feral’ animal applications a little differently.

While animal welfarists have actively supported the notion of fertility control of unwanted animals, and of less inhumane lethal methods, it is undeniably the agricultural (and environmental interests) that have largely driven the political and funding support for the research. Will this affect the direction of the research and the likely chosen mode of operation of the agents developed? We fear efficacy through the shortest route may triumph over the most humane route.

So the questions then is; is just ‘any’ fertility control system more humane? A difficult decision-making process will be required when the delivery mechanism is a virus which itself may cause suffering, i.e. a genetically modified myxoma virus to induce infertility. A total ethical cost comparison with other existing methods of population control becomes a numbers game and will require an updated ‘*Animal Impact Statement*’ and an open public debate long before it is ready for release.

One stated aim of the forum was to ‘*ensure our research is firmly aimed at meeting your (stakeholder) needs*’. Our needs are those of the rabbits’; intervention that causes significantly less or no suffering, and are more effective (and thus affecting less animals). We all share the quest for the ‘more effective’ part, but the odds may be against ensuring the methods developed are the most humane; we must overcome historical negative views of rabbits and the strong interests of agricultural funding bodies keen to simply address ‘damage’. The selection of the new population control methods to develop should include humane considerations at the outset, rather than expect to ‘sell’ any new methods in the years to come. Public concern for all animals, and even for ‘feral’ animals, is growing.