



For immediate release:

From orcas to 'Freedom Food,' animal welfare expectations at all-time high

Calgary, Alta., April 11, 2006: A new world of heightened expectations for animal welfare is taking shape, with major implications for global livestock industries, says Dr. David Fraser, professor in the University of British Columbia's (UBC) Animal Welfare Program.

"Animal welfare has become a topic that attracts responses at a global level," says Fraser, who spoke at the recent Livestock Care Conference in Red Deer, hosted by Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC). "We have seen profound changes in social policy worldwide, and agriculture, as by far the world's largest user of animals, has been at the focus of a lot of these changes."

Examples abound, says Fraser, who consults broadly on global animal welfare initiatives. In May 2005, the OIE or World Organization for Animal Health adopted its first animal welfare guidelines, supported by 167 countries. In March 2006, the European Union announced a new Action Plan on the Protection and Welfare of Animals, for the years 2006-2010.

There's no sign of things slowing down, he says. Just a few weeks ago, Fraser received a discussion document on proposed animal welfare initiative of the International Finance Corporation – the investment arm of the World Bank. "When the World Bank becomes an agent of change for animal welfare, we realize we've entered a different world."

In a lead-off presentation at the Livestock Care Conference, Fraser, delivered an update on what this new world looks like at the big picture level. Highlights of the presentation are captured in a new feature article, available on the AFAC Web site, www.afac.ab.ca. The AFAC Web site also includes an archive of news releases on Conference discussions, and broad information on livestock care progress.

Fraser, a long-time Vancouver resident, kicked-off his presentation by recounting the history of orcas (killer whales) at the Vancouver Aquarium, to illustrate a major shift in the public perception of animal welfare over the past 50 years.

That history began in 1964, when the Aquarium sent a small ship out of the local port to kill a wild whale, with the idea of cleaning the skeleton and using it as part of an educational display in the Aquarium.

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“This didn’t go quite as planned,” says Fraser. “At the end of the day the crew had caught an orca, and they had injured it, but it wasn’t dead. So they transferred it to a tank in the Aquarium where it recovered. And as soon as a more suitable display tank could be constructed, the live orca rapidly became the Aquarium’s star attraction, and was followed by a string of other orcas that were captured or purchased from other facilities.”

By the 1990’s, however, attitudes had shifted dramatically. “The Aquarium found itself facing increasing pressure from critics, the media, and some of its own paying customers, who questioned the ethics of keeping such intelligent, social animals in captivity.” After a long debate, the Aquarium decided to no longer keep orcas, and the last one was transferred to an aquarium in San Diego where it would have more space and the company of other orcas.

“We went from a time when killing an orca to display its skeleton seemed like a good idea, to a time when keeping an orca in captivity was enough to trigger public protest,” says Fraser. “It was a profound change.”

That change in attitudes has resulted in change on numerous fronts, climaxing with the major global initiatives underway today. Milestones along the way have included the implementation Welfare Codes of best practices in the 1970’s and 1980’s, the banning of the battery cage in Switzerland following a referendum in 1981, the start of the “Freedom Food” labeling program in the UK in 1994, and the initiative by McDonald’s Restaurants in the U.S. in 1999 to begin requiring certain animal welfare standards as a condition of purchase from its suppliers.

“Today, global attention to animal agriculture is at an all time high and we are seeing a wide range of new actions,” says Fraser. “At the time, each of the milestones of the past several decades were surprising developments, but early indications are that during the 2000s the surprises will continue.”

AFAC is a partnership of Alberta’s major livestock groups, with a mandate to promote responsible, humane animal care within the livestock industry.

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