ANIMAL HEALTH: A BREAKPOINT in ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

EDITORS

C.T.N. Fatimah Iskandar
Latiffah Hassan
Gurmeet Kaur Dhalwal
Rosnina Yusoff
Abdul Rahman Omar
Mohd-Azam Khan Goriman Khan
Goh Yong Meng

Jalila Abu
Siti Suri Arshad
Nadzri bin Salim
Saleha Abdul Aziz
Hassan Mohd Daud
Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman

Universiti Putra Malaysia Press
Serdang 2004

Proceedings of the 11th International Conference of the Association of Institutions of Tropical Veterinary Medicine - Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 2004
Competing Expectations of the Australian Live Export Trade from Farmers, Overseas Consumers and the Australian Public

PHILLIPS, C.J.C
Centre for Animal Welfare and Ethics, School of Veterinary Science, University of Queensland, Gatton, Queensland 4343, Australia

Abstract
Australia has the largest live export industry in the world, supplying animals mainly to the Middle East as well as Malaysia and other south-east Asian countries. The trade attracts considerable attention from the Australian public, mainly out of concern for the welfare of the animals. The perspectives of the farmers, the overseas consumers, the Australian public and the animals themselves are compared and the views of veterinary students examined. Veterinary students were ambivalent about the trade until they were informed about it in detail, after which they were mainly in favour, especially if there are improvements to the provisions for the animal’s welfare. This contrasts with the majority view of the Australian public, which is against the trade. As veterinarians would be expected to have the greatest concern for animal welfare, it is possible that the public opinion might be different if they were given detailed, unbiased information about the trade. It is concluded that there is a need for research and information about this industry, which could improve its standing in the eyes of the Australian public.

Keywords: Animal welfare, consumer expectations, live animal trade

Introduction
Australia is the biggest exporter of livestock in the world today, producing c. 30 million sheep and lambs and c. 8 million cattle annually, of which 43 and 63%, respectively, are exported either alive or as carcases. The trade has been in existence for about 35 years, but for cattle it grew substantially in the mid 1990s to its current level. The sheep trade has been operating at its approximately its current level since the early 1990s. The volume of trade has suffered some perturbations recently arising from fluctuating currency exchange rates. The trade has been constantly scrutinized over its entire existence for its impact on animal welfare, but most recently it has been extensively investigated following the extended voyage of the Cormo Express, whose shipment of sheep was rejected by Saudi Arabia ostensibly on health grounds. The shipment was eventually donated after 79 days at sea to the Eritrean government, together with feed and $1 million for labour costs, when faced with the difficult alternative of being returned to Australia, which raised serious health and welfare concerns.

When considering whether the trade should continue, we must take into account the ethical position of all parties: the animals, the farmers, the public and the consumers. Different people will place different weighting on the rights and considerations of these four groups, but very often extreme positions are arrived at because people fail to understand or have sufficient concern for the position of all stakeholders in the trade. In this paper the ethical issues surrounding the live export trade are discussed, with emphasis on the different expectations of the different parties involved. Social, political, economic and animal welfare ethics are all integrally involved in the trade, with some involvement of environmental ethics. The following list of issues helps us approach this ethical dilemma with fairness and consideration for all parties.

1. The Animal’s Perspective

Points in favour of trade
They are relatively well fed and watered during the journey, better than on many farms in Australia. The payment scheme usually rewards weight gains between loading and discharge of the cargo and penalizes voyages with high mortality (> 2% for sheep and 1% for cattle, triggered by 8% of voyages in 2003), which ensures that it is in the exporters’ interest to provide suitable quantities and quality of food for the animals. Mortality, the only current measure of welfare used for the voyages, has declined in recent years, at least for cattle.

The quantity of life is extended by maintaining a viable export trade. At its most extreme, the animals might not have a life at all, if it were not for the export trade. However, it could be argued that no life is preferable to a life of misery. It could also be argued that their life is extended by the export process, but life could be more humanely extended by having a minimum slaughter age on farms. The main concern is therefore of the quality not the quantity of life.

---

1. Saudi veterinarians claimed that too many of the sheep had scabby mouth (orf). The official maximum prevalence for the shipment to be accepted is 5%.
Points against
a. Mortality rate is increased during the voyage (0.99 and 0.11% respectively for sheep and cattle in 2003), compared to the on-farm situation. There have been occasional high mortality voyages (notably the Charolais Express in 1998, 50%; the Temberong in 1999, 85%; the Becrux in 2002, 44%; and the Cormo Express in 2003, 10%).
b. The transport is a stressful procedure, with overstocking, high temperatures, motion sickness, accumulation of excreta, novelty of the situation, rough human handling and several other factors all potentially contributing to high levels of stress.
c. Access to feed may be limited by high stocking density
d. The animals may be without feed or water for extended periods of time, perhaps up to two to three days. This happens, for example, during transport to the ports and following loading.
e. Transporting animals between countries carries a risk of disease transmission to the recipient country. Live export may have spread the foot-and-mouth disease from England to France and Ireland in the 2001 outbreak.

2. The perspective of the farmer

Points in favour of trade
a. This is a major revenue earning trade, worth over $0.8 billion to the Australian livestock industry annually. Animals sold for live export command a high price
b. Without the live export trade, livestock prices generally would decline to the extent that profit margins would be seriously affected and farmers income would be eroded. Since the ban on export to Saudi Arabia in October, 2003, wether prices have fallen by $10-20 per head (DAFF, 2003). The total value of the livestock industry to the Australian economy is in excess of 15 billion $ per year and any reduction in profitability has a marked income on an already depressed rural economy.
c. All farmers have a natural desire to provide high welfare conditions for their animals and would not allow their livestock to be transported overseas if they did not believe that good conditions were being provided.
d. A market is found for mature wool-producing wether sheep, which would otherwise be wasted since there is little or no market for these to enter the human food chain in Australia.
e. Markets are opened up by the live export trade for carcase export.

Points against
a. Farmers have spent much time and effort raising stock and preserving their welfare, they would not wish to see them treated badly at the end of their life.
b. Farmers are unsure of the stress that their animals are subjected to during live export and therefore do not want to take the risk of them being maltreated.

3. The Perspective of the Overseas Consumer

Points in favour of trade
a. Meat can be provided that would not otherwise be available from their own country.
b. The quality of Australian livestock produce is better than from home produced livestock.
c. If livestock products were not obtain from Australia. They would be obtained from Africa or South America, where quality would be reduced and there might be less concern for and regulation of the animals’ welfare.

Points against
a) A Muslim country should not support the purchase of goods from a Christian country, especially Australia which was part of the coalition to invade and occupy Iraq in 2003. A total of 98% of Australian sheep are destined for the Muslim countries of Middle East and many cattle and the majority of goats are sent to Malaysia.
b) Livestock production should be intensified in the home country, if necessary, purchasing feed stocks from abroad to feed their animals.
c) The Middle East is adapting to modern living conditions, with more meat being purchased through supermarkets, which can be provided in the form of vacuum packed or frozen meat, and less through the souk, or wet market. More households have refrigeration to store the meat before cooking.

4. The perspective of the Australian public

Points in favour of trade
a. The trade maintains farmers’ jobs. Over 9000 people are employed in the industry and for every job in the industry it is estimated that another 1.6 jobs are created, for example livestock agents, transport operators and in feedlots (DAFF, 2004). Thus the trade boosts the national economy and maintains a vibrant population in the rural areas. However, the number of people employed is small in comparison with other industries of comparable economic size2.

2. The Australian thoroughbred racing industry is of approximately the same economic value and provides 77,755 full-time and c. 170,000 part-time jobs.
It is unlikely that the home industry could absorb the extra livestock availability\(^1\) if the trade was restricted, and home prices would fall leading to reduced ability of the farmers to care for their stock.

b. The trade preserves a rural environment that is well managed and to some attractive and nostalgic.

c. The trade provides a valued food source for an overseas population with limited income, helping to feed people in countries where there high quality meat protein cannot easily be provided.

d. Most purchasers of the livestock are Muslims, therefore the trade will help to reduce the divide between Muslim and Christian parts of the world.

e. If livestock are not provided by Australia, other countries will provide them that are less sympathetic to animal welfare considerations. However, international standards being prepared by the OIE may eventually require other countries to adopt equally stringent requirements.

Points against

a. Australia is a civilised nation, which should not allow animals to be mistreated and stressed during live export.

b. Australians have no control over the way in which the animals are treated when they arrive in a foreign country, and there is evidence that they are sometimes severely mistreated. Slaughter in Muslim countries does not generally involve stunning the animals, whereas this is mandatory in Australia for welfare reasons. Slaughter of sheep for Eid-al-Adha (the Feast of Sacrifice) involves laying the animal on its left side facing the Holy Ka’aba while its throat is cut, therefore requiring a live animal. However, pilgrims purchase a ‘sacrifice voucher’, and there is no certainty that this ritual has been adopted for Australian sheep.

c. The keeping of cattle and sheep on large areas of Australian outback contributes to land degradation and depletion of subterranean water reserves. The industry is not ecologically sustainable.

d. The native flora and fauna of Australia are being marginalised by the extensive use of land for pasture production to rear livestock for live export. Many species in northern Australia are threatened with extinction because of habitat degradation, which is mirrored in the environmental degradation in South America due to conversion of tropical and subtropical regions into pastureland for cattle.

e. The moral integrity of farmers may be challenged by the need to supply animals for the live export trade, or if they are aware of the problems they may become immune to them because their livelihood depends on the trade. Farmers may feel a greater responsibility to provide for their family than to cater for the welfare of their stock, or this conflict in their ethical persuasions may in itself cause them stress.

f. The use of land for the production of livestock, which are transported halfway around the world before they are consumed, is wasteful of energy and other resources and wasteful of labour. Land would more efficiently used for growing crops to feed people locally.

g. Local jobs in abattoirs have been lost (estimated by the Australian meat processing industry to be 17000 jobs and 25 abattoirs) due to the live export, compared with if the animals were slaughtered locally.

Combining the Positions and Needs of All Parties

Having considered the viewpoints of all the major stakeholders in the livestock export industry, how can these be amalgamated to arrive at an informed viewpoint? In some ethical dilemmas the relative importance of the different stakeholders is immediately obvious to most people. The value placed on human welfare, for example, would be placed above that of animal welfare by most people in consideration of whether to raise animals for food consumption in underdeveloped countries. However, this is not the case necessarily for the live export industry, where the impact on animals appears direct and considerable, and that on most Australians is more marginal and less direct. All solutions seem wrong from some perspective, but all perspectives are not equally heard. The voice of the Australian public is more apparent than the consumers, especially in Australia, and the media regularly portrays the views of idealist animal activists but rarely the views of the industry. The situation is therefore complicated by the influence that the media will have on people’s perspective of the welfare of animals during the transport process. This may not be a correct perspective and the public have a right to fair and unbiased information on the issue.

People also have very different perspectives on the use of fragile, climatically challenged land to grow livestock, and the rights and wrongs of doing this to support food production for a country many miles away. In any democratic country the majority view should prevail, but in this instance the majority of the population may not have a clear idea on what the exporting procedure precisely involves other than that gained from the media. Hence it is essential that the trade is opened up for inspection and research is conducted to improve those aspects of the trade causing people most concern.
Veterinary Perspective
The trade currently requires an attendant veterinarian for all long distance voyages with cattle, but not sheep, although mortality of the latter is much higher, suggesting that veterinary provision is dependent on economic value of the cargo, rather than the welfare risk. The Keniry report (DAFF, 2003) recommends mandatory attendance on all long distance voyages (over 10 days). The veterinary profession therefore have an important stake in the industry, particularly when the links to farmers are taken into account.

An exercise with 88 first year veterinary students at the University of Queensland revealed that, despite the high profile Cormo Express disaster 10 months previously which received extensive media coverage, only 16 had a firm opinion before studying the topic (8 in favour of the trade, 8 opposed). After viewing a video recording of a live shipment, being explained the considerations of all parties (as presented above) and writing a researched report on live export, 60% of students were definitely in favour of continuing the trade, 8% were mainly in favour, 14% were unsure, 6% were mainly against and 13% were definitely against. Most students who believed that the trade should continue conceded that some modification of practices was required. This compares with a majority of the Australian public who are believed to be mainly against the trade (DAFF, 2003) and demonstrates either the need for education of the public or that the public have a different ethical perspective to prospective veterinarians. The latter seems unlikely since prospective veterinarians would be expected to rate animal welfare as a higher priority than other interested parties.

Conclusions
The live export trade is being scrutinized by many parties, but all voices are not equally heard and not all parties have adequate information on the impact of the trade on animal welfare in particular. The views of the Australian public appear at odds with that of informed veterinary students, at least, which may be due to lack of adequate information provided to the public since prospective veterinarians would be expected to rate animal welfare impact higher than other ethical issues surrounding the trade. The voice of the consumer is rarely heard. There is a need for openness on the part of the trade, and for unbiased reporting on the part of the media.

References