

Animal Husbandry and Welfare: Part 1 of 4

March 2012

☀️ “How do you treat your animals?”

This was the first question put to a Canadian meat exporter, participating in a Canadian-government led EU Trade Mission. He was caught broadsided. He had diligently prepared and forwarded specifications, order quantities, terms of delivery, attestations to quality. He had not anticipated this question, and upon his return, began a systematic inquiry into the care given to Canadian livestock.

☀️ Cultural Values Figure Strongly

During these early years of the 21st Century, one may be inclined to cast a disparaging eye on some current farming practices, with the belief that animals were better cared for in days of yore. Yet the facts would not agree. The Southern Hemisphere whaling operation of the 1800's, which provided raw material for many consumer goods – ladies' corsets being a poignant example – was an intensive, aggressive mass hunting expedition. Meanwhile, the Inuit of the Northern Hemisphere hunted on a much smaller scale, and valued the captured whale to its utmost, including veneration in the form of fine art. A whale bone sculpture required a significant amount of pre-planning and foresight. The optimum age of a whale carcass from which to create whale bone art is approximately 200 years (the thaw cycle would be short!). Prior to that, the skeletal structure is sticky with raw sinewy muscle meat, and too stinky, detectable from a kilometer or so away. Beyond the 200-year point in time, the skeletal frame is too dry and brittle. Whale bone art is an everlasting use of a captured whale.



Karoo Ashevak (1940-1974), Talujruak (Spence Bay), *Spirit* c. 1970, Whalebone, inlay, Sprott/MIA Collection. On display at [The Museum of Inuit Art](#). The whale that provided the bone for *Spirit* was captured c.1770.

Whale hunting practices may be a harbinger of societal change. Killer whales on the North American west coast have legal protection, though not an endangered species as whole. [A recent proposal](#) to grant whales and dolphins civil rights is based on their intelligence and self-awareness.

☀️ Market Drivers and Deterrents

Two polar positions bookend an increasingly thorny ethical debate on this issue. Drivers spurring societal monitoring and regulatory control are: i. inclusion of animal care as an integral element of overall food quality, with direct implications for animal health and food safety; ii. consumer demand for higher standards of animal protection, upon which several companies (e.g. [Burger King](#)) have recently developed a point of product differentiation. On the other hand, livestock farmers are business people. They must regard animals in their care as business inputs, cover the pertinent costs, and turn a profit.

☀️ EU initiative; several global responses

The EU has formally addressed the expectation that humans, as custodians of the earth, humanely raise livestock and enact supportive legislation. In March 2006, the European Community Conference on Animal Husbandry upheld the following mandate:

“The EC's activities in this area start with the recognition that animals are sentient beings. The general aim is to ensure that animals do not endure avoidable pain or suffering, and obliges the owner/keeper of the animals to respect minimum welfare requirements.”

The EU has enacted the [Protocol on Protection and Welfare of Animals](#) which obliges Member States and EU Institutions to regard the welfare of animals – livestock, pets and experimental. The scope of the EU law includes five freedoms which date from the [Bramwell Committee of 1965](#): freedom from discomfort; hunger and thirst; fear and distress; pain, injury and disease; and, freedom to express natural behaviour. Several jurisdictions, producer associations, and universities are proactively establishing animal husbandry and welfare legislation and guidelines, while acknowledging the business requirements of livestock farmers and handlers, examples of which will be provided in future issues of Food Fax this year. **FF**

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