

**THE WELFARE OF FARMED DEER:
THE UK PERSPECTIVE**

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Vets at the moment appear worldwide to be at the receiving end of the more aggressive animal welfarists. Within the last few months one dean of an American veterinary college has been shot dead and two British veterinarians have been the subject of bomb attacks, one of which seriously wounded a 3 month old baby. Although the stated reason for these attacks has been the use of animals in experiments, nevertheless the welfare of farmed animals is a pressing concern, even if it were not also the prime consideration of vets to safeguard the welfare of animals entrusted to their care. As we all know the declaration which members of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons take on admission as newly graduated vets is that their "constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of animals committed to their care". It is, in any case, likely that the welfare of animals was the principal motive for most prospective vets choosing the profession as their career.

Perhaps the first thing to understand in considering the general public's attitude to animal welfare issues is that their response is almost entirely emotional. It is not therefore particularly helpful to respond with a simply logical and scientific analysis of the facts. For vets and others, trained in the scientific disciplines, or perhaps even more especially, the farmer weaned on the practicalities of day to day farming, this public response is extremely difficult to comprehend.

If you ask ten people today on London's Oxford Street what they think about farming, nine of them will express negative feelings, often frank disgust. A similar question in Paris would probably be answered much less clearly. And in Lisbon or Athens the farmer might actually be looked on favourably. These differences I believe reflect the length of time during which a nation has been urbanised. The onus is usually placed on the farmer for exploiting the animal and he is therefore seen in an increasingly unfavourable light. The further removed an individual is from the actualities of agriculture, the more strong this attitude to the farmer becomes. In Britain only 3% of the workforce is employed in agriculture, whilst in Portugal for example the figure is nearly 30%. Few in Britain now were born on farms, or even have grandparents who were involved in agriculture. As soon as a family arrives in a city, they create romantic ideas of what agriculture was like. They see this romantic ideal as their birthright and jealously resent any deviation from the Beatrix Potter type ideal.

Much the same holds for deer. The romantic conception of deer as a noble free-ranging animal is deeply ingrained. The notion of containing them in a wire enclosure for meat production is seen as demeaning something which represents the very spirit of freedom. It doesn't actually make much difference what the animal really feels itself. Deer have therefore received the brunt of criticism from people who have almost certainly never seen farmed deer.

Invariably these people taken to a deer farm will be astonished to find the animals aren't throwing themselves at the fencing all the time. Unfortunately it is simply not possible to show all those who protest round a deer farm. The most criticism will come from those who belong to organisations which ask their members to write to their political representatives or to, for example, supermarkets handling

farmed deer meat.

This body of criticism is usually ill-informed but extremely numerous and will carry some weight with Members of Parliament when the letters arrive in volume. The other main body of criticism, in Europe at least and in America, comes from the hunters. In Britain deer stalking has been the traditional activity for a small number of wealthy landowners since before Queen Victoria built her Highland palace at Balmoral. Increasingly these landowners have been obliged to let some of the stalking, and although the "trophies" are indifferent, the faded grandeur of the hunting lodges and the traditionalism still attracts significant numbers of European, English and American sportsmen.

The stalking landowners have been stalking since they were young boys and they have powerful political connections: they may be peers with a seat in the House of Lords, or have friends who are Members of Parliament. If they conceive deer farming as a debasement of their noble free-ranging wild quarry, this is likely to be extremely damaging to the deer farmer.

The fact that the wild deer die each spring of starvation in substantial numbers is a cause for concern to these landowners, but doesn't seem to conflict with their feelings about deer farming which, if encouraged, could remove useful numbers of live deer from the hills.

Astonishingly in a nation which considers itself to be highly animal welfare conscious, quite a significant number of people derive a lot of pleasure from hunting red deer with hounds from horseback in the south west of England. This fits into a similar category to the stalking in the Highlands, being pursued by relatively well-to-do people who, despite the small number actually involved, represent a substantial political lobby.

So much for a brief analysis of the sources of the criticism, what has been its effect?

In 1978 news of the success of the New Zealand deer farmers in creating a market for farm produced velvet antlers began to filter through to Britain. The British Deer Society, which broadly represents the interests of the deer stalker, determined that the amputation of living antlers was unacceptable to them and urgently mounted a campaign to abolish the procedure.

The newly created Farm Animal Welfare Council was asked to investigate "velvetting". This Council had been created to consider various welfare issues and comprises representatives of all parts of the livestock industries, together with a number of those involved in animal welfare issues. Taking advice from the small number of British deer farmers then in existence, they rapidly pronounced velvetting a mutilation and recommended it be made illegal.

The Welfare of Livestock (Deer) Order 1980 was the first legislation to take account of the new deer farming business.

Later, the Farm Animal Welfare Council considered other aspects of deer farming. On the last occasion the Council had a split decision over whether or not it should be permitted for deer to be killed in abattoirs. This was very unusual and arose as follows. Deer farmers initially were very concerned that they be allowed to continue to kill deer on farms. For those retailing venison from their farms this was an important concession: cattle, sheep and pigs cannot of course normally be killed on farms. It was never anticipated that the slaughter of deer in abattoirs be made illegal and deer farmers wanted to preserve both options. It was therefore demonstrated to the Farm Animal Welfare Council how humane it was to kill deer in the field with a rifle and they were duly impressed. A vociferous minority of FAWC would actually like to have some cattle and sheep killed on farms and they saw deer farming as an opportunity to "get a foot in the door".

For these reasons the abattoir slaughter of deer has become a 'cause celebre' for those concerned with farm animal welfare. Pressure on sympathetic Members of Parliament has led to repeated parliamentary questions about the welfare of deer in abattoirs and this inevitably creates the impression amongst politicians that there is something the matter with the procedure. This places the Ministry of Agriculture in an extremely difficult position since MAFF is repeatedly being accused by the British media of favouring the farmer against the interests of both animals and consumers.

A Private Member's Bill put up by Emma Nicholson was drafted with government support and designed to protect the welfare of deer entering abattoirs. It was a perfectly reasonable Bill that would have put in place legislation that would have regularised the processing of deer through abattoirs. However, perhaps for this reason the aggressive Compassion in World Farming organisation used its lobbying strength to have the Bill crushed and currently deer passing through abattoirs do not enjoy the same protection as cattle and sheep and pigs.

MAFF does tend to be sympathetic to the farmer as it is composed of those who deal daily with farmers in livestock and who can see the reality behind the emotions. However, there is coming into the Ministry a group who have less farming experience, whose job it is to respond to the welfare lobbyists, and who are charged with improving MAFF's public image.

It is important not to become sanctimonious about those who preach animal welfare in a dogmatic, and to our ideas often misconceived, way. As vets the welfare of animals is, or should be, our first concern. Those who criticise farmers and vets on welfare grounds are genuinely motivated and they should be treated sympathetically. I am often in disagreement with deer farmers on the British Deer Farmers' Association Council who favour a more confrontational approach. To my mind this is absolute folly. We are not in a position of strength; deer farming could be snuffed out in a moment if a genuine confrontation occurred over, for example, the issue of putting deer into abattoirs.

So how should we handle what is a matter of crucial importance? In my opinion the dangers of confrontation can only be resolved by establishing a dialogue. For this reason I personally, and the BDFA, have devoted a great deal of time to "public relations". By this I mean making prompt responses to newspapers or broadcast media whenever any criticism of deer farming is made. Showing deer at public events, such as agricultural shows, has also, I believe, been of enormous value in overcoming the prejudices of especially the hunting lobby. They find it difficult to argue that deer are unhappy in captivity when a tame stag or hind in the enclosure so obviously enjoys human company. This has been extremely valuable at our annual national Game Fair where for 7 years my farm has sold its celebrated Veniburgers within a few metres of adult stags. This produces vehement reactions in a few consumers, but they have to accept, unless they are vegetarians which is unlikely, that there is no logic in their reaction. It is simply an emotional knee-jerk reflex.

The hunting clientele and organisers of the Game Fair have remained a little ambivalent in their response to our stand which encourages me to think we have hit a raw nerve and we are on the right lines here. Particularly since our Veniburgers are the only "game meat" at the Game Fair.

On the same principles of promoting deer farming by a little gentle education my wife and I floated a tourist enterprise, together with some nearby landowners. This Scottish Deer Centre, as it came to be called, attempts to explain by an audio-visual show the harsh reality of life for the wild Scottish deer plagued by parasites, inadequate food and inclement weather. An exhibition sketches the history of the deer and their social importance in the Highlands of Scotland, now and historically. The climax of the visit is however the guided tour around the tame stags which can be touched by the visitors who hopefully then leave, no longer feeling the deer are mystical wild creatures only seen at dawn and dusk, but instead they are animals capable of responding to human care and attention, like other animals.

They should also form a firm impression of farmed animals being well looked after and content, against the rather less clearly happy life of the wild deer.

All this may appear to be a digression but it is by way of explaining how I believe the welfare hurdle can be jumped by the deer farming industry, ie dialogue and education. This of course works in two directions: the dialogue will create the realisation of how important it is for deer farmers to make every effort to keep their animals in a civilised and humane fashion. However, there is no point in educating the consumer if our house is not in perfect order.

In New Zealand you have a better chance than we have because you live in a less urbanised society and you can benefit commercially from the "NIMBY" syndrome. Improved communications will, however, eventually erode that advantage and if velvetting stags is to continue without tarnishing the whole industry's image worldwide, then the process and its projection must be well enough managed to be able to present a public face. The BBC television programme made some years ago about the helicopter capture and shooting of hinds in New Zealand was objective in explaining the need to preserve the native bush by reducing deer numbers, but it still created a minor outcry in Europe. A film on the velvet industry could do untold damage to New Zealand venison sales in many markets. The consumer at which the venison marketing is targetted has the same social profile as the man who funds the welfare societies. It is a public relations minefield.

Although it is not strictly immediately obvious as a welfare issue another subject enters the general sphere of discussion. I am referring to the use of artificial breeding techniques and hormones in the production of venison. In Britain recently we have had to disassociate the Deer Farmers' Association from the use of melatonin in inducing earlier breeding of hinds as being potentially damaging to the venison trade. There was a remarkable unanimity among the Association that we should not countenance, let alone promote, the use of melatonin in this way. Although of course there are welfare implications for the use of the drug particularly in the Scottish climate, this was not the issue. The question was whether venison produced should come from a herd in which hormones were being used. As scientists you and I can understand the stupidity of this attitude but we have to accept that we are dealing with a poorly informed general public.

I believe it is the responsibility of the farmer to break down this general ignorance and in particular the deer farmer who is one of the most controversial, must take the lead in educating people about the true facts of the industry if it is to continue to develop worldwide.