

Human-Animal Relationships and Good Animal Handling

Our topics for this week are:

- Domestication of animals
- Declining quality of animal handling
- Types of handlers

It would be fascinating to know when, with whom, and where did most of the better animal handling techniques originate. Nearly all are lost in history and their contributions may be hundreds or thousands of years old. Society is at a critical point now that risks the loss of humane, effective, and safe methods of animal handling.

Throughout the more than 14,000 years of domesticated animal handling, the benefits of good handling practices for the animal and for the handler were obvious, not only to the handlers but also the observing public. Beginning in 1850 with the Second Industrial Revolution and accelerated by the use of the automobile in the early 1900s, people have become more detached from working directly with animals.

A disconnect has developed between the decision makers, those who actually handle animals, and general society. For example, over 95% of the U.S. population is three or more generations removed from farm or ranch living.

In this and the episodes to come, I will describe handling of all types of domestic animals, and a few that are not domesticated but still kept as pets.

Domestication

How an animal reacts to handling is not just the handler and the technique being used. Animal response to handling depends on it's age, sex, and breed ... its health ... the weather its body conformation ... how it observed its mother to react to handling its early socialization to humans prior to puberty ... its past handling experiences ... and ... how long has its species been domesticated. Domestication includes the selective breeding for individuals who adapt well to being around humans and being handled.

Domestication is the process in which an animal species is habituated to survive in the persistent company of human beings. They are selectively bred for human desired disposition, appearance, food or fiber production, or work ability. Prior to the domestication of the dog, animal-human interactions were hunter-prey. Animal handling and restraint began with the domestication of the dog which is estimated to have occurred as early as 14,000 years ago. The next animals to live dependent on the care of humans were goats (12,000 years ago) and sheep (11,000 years ago) followed by cattle, and swine (10,000 years ago). The cat may have been domesticated in approximately 9,500 years ago, before the donkey (7,000 years ago) and horse (5,500 years ago). Chickens, llamas, and alpacas were domesticated at the same approximate time as horses. The turkey, Guinea pig, and rabbit were domesticated about 1900 years ago, 1100 years ago, and 500 years ago, respectively.

Other animals such as reptiles, birds, and rodents are contained and handled by humans, but are not domesticated. They may be tamed individually and made tolerant of being handled. Domesticated species can be made tolerant of the presence of humans much easier. In general, domesticated animals are safer to handle than tamed, non-domesticated animals.

Effective, safer animal handling and restraint has therefore evolved over approximately 14,000 years. The basic principle of handling animals is well established: restrain as little as possible, but persist and do as much as it takes as long it is safe and humane. Excessive, unnecessary restraint or initial failure will be magnified as greater resistance by the animal to handling in the future.

The reasons to handle animals include physical examination; preventive, medical, or surgical treatments; grooming; training; recreation; and companionship. Carnivores which are prey animals can be handled individually without others of their species present. Herd animals are handled with less stress if they are allowed to remain in a group or in near proximity to a group.

Many animals become bonded to a handler and a level of bilateral trust is established. Older animals that have had several gentle handlers often transfer trust in their past handlers to a new handler. Because of these situations of mutual trust, it is common to see handlers put themselves in harm's way with animals trusted to be well behaved. For example, horse handlers may walk under the lead rope of a tied horse. Although this is extremely dangerous, the handler has become lulled into a false sense of safety. Giving into a false sense of security and not ALWAYS exercising basic precautions is the major reason for handler injuries.

All animals that are not properly socialized to humans early in their life, or are subjected to circumstances where they feel pain or being endangered can injure handlers out of an attempt to escape or defend themselves. Good animal handlers remain safer by not taking unnecessary chances with dogs that are said to "never bite", horses that "never kick", and similar injury traps.

THE DECLINE OF PROPER HANDLING

Good handling of animals is declining. Good handlers know the animals they are to handle. They become familiar with animals in their care, including their normal habits of eating, drinking, sleeping, urinating, defecating, and exercising so that problems can be identified early and corrected when possible. Handling animals in seclusion without public visibility by employees or agents of owners fosters an environment that allows the decline of good animal handling. Several states in the U.S. have passed "ag gag" laws, which protect handlers of livestock from public scrutiny of inhumane handling of animals. Shielding of animal handling occurs with both livestock and companion animals. Some examples include:

- Animal trainers who require appointments for owners to see training practices
- Veterinary hospital personnel who remove dogs and cats from the owners observation to provide non-emergency handling, exams, and treatments
- Close confinement of livestock and poultry that prohibit public observation
- State laws that prohibit photographs of animals in confinement

Extreme confinement of production animals began in the U.S. with chickens in the 1930s. Prior to that time, food animals had never been subjected to extreme confinement in the history of domesticated animals. The move from small farms to industrial level raising of livestock has exacerbated the desensitization of handlers to how animals are confined and handled. Ironically, raising of animals with low physical and mental stress has repeatedly been shown to result in faster gains in productivity. However, since higher expenses in facilities and labor costs offset some of the gain in productivity, the pressure for extreme confinement persists. In the last few years, public knowledge of the disadvantages of raising animals in extreme confinement has grown. As a result, Burger King became the first U.S. corporation to announce it would begin switching to cage-free eggs and gestation-crate free pork. Similar actions by Safeway, Kroger, Oscar Mayer, McDonalds, and other food companies later followed the lead by Burger King. Smithfield Foods and Tyson Fresh Meats announced proactive plans to improve hog housing and handling.

The best, and only meaningful, source of evidence for good animal handling, restraint, or confinement is what the animal reveals by their behavior when the handling and restraint are repeated or persists. If the behavior is unnatural, that is, stereotypic or exaggerated fear, poor handling or restraint methods have taken place. Stereotypic behaviors are unnatural repetitive purposeless movements, caused by excessive confinement and include pacing, weaving, chewing cages or stalls, and self-mutilation, among others. Unnatural behavior as a result of poor handling, restraint, or confinement should be among the primary means of assessing the need for improved management of animals, along with the number of animals demonstrating excessive lameness, external injuries, and vocalizations.

Animal welfare is the state of the animal, and how it is coping with the conditions in which it lives. When humans domesticated animals, they took on the responsibilities to provide shelter, food, and a painless death. Fulfilling these responsibilities has been erratic. In the 1700s, animals were not believed to have a soul and therefore did not have feelings. Only the ability to work or produce food or fiber were used as indicators of sufficient welfare. The first law to protect animals from abuse did not exist until 1822; this was the Act to Prevent the Cruel and Improper Treatment of Cattle which was passed in Britain. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was later established in 1866, and in 1915, the Mayo Clinic became the first U.S. institution to have a veterinarian oversee the care of its research animals.

In the 1960s, due to pressure for humane handling of production animals stemming from Ruth Harrison's book, "Animal Machines", the British government commissioned the Brambell report on intensive animal production. In 1965, the Commission listed five freedoms that animals should be ensured. Those freedoms are:

1. A suitable environment
2. A suitable diet
3. The ability to exhibit normal behavior
4. The need for an animal to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
5. Protection from pain, suffering, injury, and disease

The five freedoms are currently used to assess animal welfare by the World Organization

for Animal Health. In the U.S., provisions for the ability to exhibit normal behavior are not always provided for production animals (livestock and poultry). In some cases, farm animal welfare has been erroneously evaluated by producer groups solely on whether the animal is able to grow or produces milk sufficient to meet the producer's expectations.

TYPES OF HANDLERS AND HANDLING

What are the types of handlers and handling? The need to handle animals varies and the approach varies with the need. Pet owners and stockmen have the luxury of time to potentially develop a relationship and trust with their animals. These handlers are at some disadvantage in handling new animals because they do not see the range of behaviors animals of the same species can exhibit nor the change that can be caused by illness or injury as do veterinarians and veterinary technicians. Pet owners and stockmen are more likely to drift to an extreme of either ignoring potential dangers of handling animals or exaggerating the potential danger.

Animal handlers do not benefit anyone or any animal by using inappropriate or unnecessary restraint on an animal. This raises the questions: what is inappropriate and unnecessary? And, what are appropriate and needed alternatives? We'll seek answers to these questions next time.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- How long a species has been domesticated affects its ability to be handled
- Knowledge and skills for good animal handling practices are becoming lost and allowing animal handling without public scrutiny enables inhumane practices
- Animal handlers must avoid over confidence in handling seemingly gentle animals and avoiding over restraint of seemingly resistant animals

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Many thanks are owed to Lynn Vellios who drew the excellent illustrations for my book.

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.

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