

## **Where Have Most of the Good Animal Handlers Gone?**

Our topics for this week are::

- **Benefits of good animal handling**
- **Causes of good animal handling attrition**
- **Reliable sources of information on animal handling**

Effective, safer animal handling and restraint has evolved over approximately 14,000 years. The basic principle 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 or restrain individual animals include physical examination; prophylactic, medical, or surgical treatments; grooming; training; recreation; and companionship. Carnivores can be handled individually without others of their species present. Herd animals are handled as individuals 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 handlers, all of whom did not mistreat the animal, often transfer trust in their past handlers to a new handler. Because of these situations of 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 scenarios.

### **ATTRITION OF PROPER HANDLING**

Handlers should 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.

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 with the Second Industrial Revolution that began in 1850 and accelerated by the advent of the automobile in the early 1900s, humans 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. More than 95% of the U.S. population is three or more generations removed from farm or ranch living.

In addition to urbanization resulting in less youth being exposed to proper animal handling, there has been de-emphasis on animal handling and containment in veterinary medical education. In most college departments of animal science, there is a higher priority on the teaching of laboratory genetics and corporate management of livestock production than on best practices of animal handling.

Handling animals in seclusion without public visibility by employees or agents of owners fosters an environment that allows the attrition of good animal handling. Several states in the U.S. have passed “ag gag” laws, which intentionally or unintentionally protect handlers of livestock from public scrutiny of inhumane handling of animals. Shielding of animal handling occurs with both livestock and companion animals. 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

In the 1940s, the discovery of streptomycin was the first of many antibiotics that allowed the raising of food animals in greater confinement with less risk of communicable disease. In the 1930s chickens were the first to be raised in large-scale extreme confinement. Large feedlots for cattle became widespread in the 1960s. By 1990, most sows were kept in gestation crates on concrete floors.

The move from small farms to industrial level raising of livestock has exacerbated the desensitization of on-site 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.

Evaluation of the quality of animal handling and restraint is not an exacting science. 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 (stereotypic or exaggerated fear), poor handling or restraint methods have taken place. Stereotypic behaviors can be caused to exceed random occurrence by excessive confinement and include pacing, weaving, chewing cages or stalls, and self-mutilation, such as, feather picking, excessive grooming, 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 17th century, animals were not believed to have a soul and therefore did not have feelings. The French scientist and philosopher, Rene Descartes (day-kart), stated that only humans possess a mind capable of thought and consciousness. Animals, lacked this mind and could not experience feelings like pain or pleasure. As a result, 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. One hundred years later, 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. These freedoms are freedom from hunger and thirst, from discomfort, from pain, injury or disease, to express normal behavior, and from fear and distress.

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 the criterion of whether the animal grows muscle or produces milk sufficient to meet the producer's expectations.

The American Veterinary Medical Association has defined animal welfare as "when an animal is healthy, comfortable, well nourished, safe, able to express innate behavior, and not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress." In 2010, the AVMA changed the Veterinarian's Oath to "I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health by adding AND WELFARE."

So, where have many of the good animal handlers gone? They have been led away by separation from the handling of animals for purposes other than pampering a housepet. They have been misled by the teaching of animal handling designed to meet corporate financial profits. They have been fed misinformation on social media that deals with animal handling. They have been miseducated by poor role models and groups with financial conflicts of interest who sell training materials, training supplies, and training certificates.

Please note that Better Animal Handling podcast is my hobby and provides free educational materials, verbal instructions and printable notes, without any conflicts of interest. Listeners are made aware of related textbooks for sale, if the listener wishes to add additional depth to the topics discussed on Better Animal Animal podcasts. The information provided is carefully, selected and edited by me who has handled all domestic species over a career of professional animal handling for more than 60 years, including more than 50 years as a licensed veterinarian. I appreciate your interest in better animal handling and hope to share more with you in the future.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

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

- 1. Good animal handling leads to greater safety around and for animals, greater productivity, better training of animals, and less stress.**
- 2. The causes for declining numbers of good animal handlers are primarily financial and a shift of population toward urban environments.**
- 3. Before selecting a source of information or mentor on good animal handling always assess the risk of conflicted interests in those sources or mentors.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 250 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.