

Science in the Service of Animal Welfare: The UFAW Symposium, Edinburgh, 2–4 April 2003

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Professor Marian Dawkins, University of Oxford

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Introduction and overview

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Robert Burns's 'To a mouse' deserves another airing here. The UFAW Symposium 'Science in the Service of Animal Welfare', the proceedings of which are published in this issue of *Animal Welfare*, was held in Edinburgh; not so far from the Ayrshire land that Burns was farming, unsuccessfully, when he wrote this famous poem. In it, he commiserates with the mouse — '*the wee sleekit cawrin timrous beastie*' — whose nest he has upturned and destroyed with his plough on a bitter November day in 1785 and which has now to endure '*the Winter's sleety dribble*'. This was not an easy time for Burns either due to complications arising from his startlingly complex domestic arrangements involving more or less simultaneous liaisons with Lizzie Paton, Jean Armour and Mary Campbell, and, addressing the mouse, he concludes:

*'Still thou art blest compar'd wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But, Och! I backward cast my e'e
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!'*

In its common use, the term 'animal welfare' often represents an assortment of rather vague notions to do with health, pleasant feelings, pastoral harmony or other concepts (see Fraser *et al* 1997). For Burns (as for me — see Kirkwood 2004), it is what is in the mind's e'e (eye) that is the central issue. He assumes here that, whilst both mice and men have such e'es, they differ in their scopes: that of the beastie 'seeing' only the present, whilst ours can, in addition, look back and forth in time. It is this, he assumes, that makes the difference in how mouse and man fare when things '*gang aft agley*' (often go awry). Animal welfare science is largely about exploring these assumptions. What matters of the present, past and future can mice and other species perceive, or have in mind? And how does what they have in mind affect how they feel?

These are very important matters. The human population exceeds six billion (incidentally, eight times greater than it was in 1785) and continues to grow rapidly. On a small planet with a finite annual productivity of organic matter (food) limited largely by the sunlight falling on it, we are, whether we like it or not, in competition with many other species. To a remarkable extent, we now influence the apportionment of essential resources amongst the 30 million other species including the tens of thousands that are widely assumed to be sentient (there are more than 20 thousand species of terrestrial vertebrates). We are thus faced with the challenge of meeting the requirements of the still very rapidly growing human population, whilst protecting, as far as possible, biodiversity and the welfare interests of other sentient species that we use or whose fates depend upon our actions.

Amongst other things, this requires that we make sound inferences and judgments about the nature of other animals' feelings — their quality (pleasantness or unpleasantness) and intensity — so that, when our interests conflict with theirs, as they will continue inevitably to do, we can attempt to balance these interests wisely and kindly, and to take proper steps to minimise the risk that the quality of their lives will be compromised.

In pursuit of these ideals, detailed animal welfare studies of the sorts described in these proceedings are gradually leading to the replacement of unsubstantiated assumptions about the welfare requirements of many species with more firmly grounded knowledge. These advances, in addition to leading the way for improvements in animal husbandry and care, often raise issues that stimulate re-examination of the ethical bases of the ways in which we interact with or use animals. The purpose of this Symposium (incidentally, the 33rd UFAW Symposium — see Wickens 2001 for details of the previous ones), was to review recent advances in the science of welfare assessment and the use of science in ethical decisions; to consider how public understanding, science, and other factors influence animal welfare policy; and to examine the application and transfer of scientific advances to the care of animals.

It is appropriate here to acknowledge UFAW's founder, Major Charles Hume. Hume, who died in 1981, was a self-effacing man but his ideas, outlined in his thoughtful and scholarly collected essays (Hume 1962), have been highly influential. He would have been delighted, having played a key role in preparing the ground for it, to see how dramatically animal welfare research has developed in recent years. Whilst employed in the Patents Office in London from the 1920s, he found time to gradually and methodically build UFAW and its philosophical framework. Sir Peter Medawar, the Nobel Prize winning immunologist who was Chairman of UFAW's Scientific Committee during the 1950s, captured the essence of Hume's aims for UFAW in these words, which are as applicable now as they were then, in his introduction to UFAW's first symposium:

'Improvements in the care of animals are not now likely to come of their own accord, merely by wishing them: there must be research ... and it is in sponsoring research of this kind, and making its results widely known, that UFAW performs one of its most valuable services.'

Despite some last minute cancellations due to travel complications associated with the Gulf war, 375 animal welfare scientists, ethicists and policy makers from 24 countries attended the symposium. The sun shone, very little ganged apley, and, thanks to the speakers and all who contributed in other ways, the event was very successful. The scale of the meeting and the high calibre of the presentations from leading authorities around the world are striking evidence of the remarkable development of this important branch of science and of its influence in animal care and on animal welfare ethics and policy.

References

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