

Contributing to Animal Welfare in Developing Countries

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Animal welfare is an important emerging global issue, and the role of the veterinary profession has been identified as key (OIE 2006). There is therefore a very worthwhile contribution to be made by vets offering their skills on a voluntary basis in developing countries.

What is “animal welfare work”?

The term “animal welfare” relates to how an animal is feeling. So whilst “animal welfare work” is often associated with the work of welfare charities, actually any clinical veterinary work is “animal welfare work” because it affects how animals feel (e.g. by reducing suffering). It is true, however, that when such work is undertaken abroad by volunteers, it is often as part of a programme of one of the various international animal welfare charities.

Promoting the “Five Freedoms” framework

Animal welfare (how an animal feels) is influenced by the factors included in the “Five Freedoms”, which are as follows:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst
2. Freedom from discomfort
3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease
4. Freedom to express normal behaviour
5. Freedom from fear and distress

The Five Freedoms provide a valuable and comprehensive framework for assessing welfare, and help ensure that certain welfare determinants (e.g. alleviating pain) are not considered at the exclusion of other key determinants (e.g. providing a suitable environment that allows for expression of normal behaviour). The framework is extremely useful in structuring your approach to animal welfare work abroad (and in the UK), and is adopted by most of the animal welfare charities that have an overseas remit. Keep it in mind! Think how the work you are doing, or planning, relates to the Five Freedoms, and how, therefore, you are going to be improving welfare. Perhaps more importantly, use it to identify areas that have not been taken in to account so that welfare can genuinely be improved, not just in certain, limited, ways. It's not realistic to expect all of the Five Freedoms to be achieved all of the time, but this should be for practical reasons (e.g. economic, cultural), and not because you hadn't considered the Five Freedoms, and therefore all of the ways in which welfare can be affected.

Animal welfare in developing countries

If you haven't worked in a developing country before, one of the first things you will become aware of are the living standards of the people in your area, and the resources and services available to them. Indeed, it is of great value to allocate, at the planning stage of your trip, some time early on in your trip for integrating with local people – by attending markets or local organised events for example, particularly if you can be accompanied by one of your hosts. This will enable you to appreciate aspects of daily life. It takes only a small number of conversations to begin to realise the constraints and challenges that are often faced as a result of poverty and related issues such as HIV/AIDS.

This is of great relevance to animal welfare because it is the backdrop against which animal welfare issues are set. It is not surprising that animal welfare-related issues may assume lower priority in some countries, when relatives are sick and funds are scarce. So do bear this in mind when you are approaching your animal welfare work – people may have what they feel to be more pressing, human, issues to worry about, rather than animals. Some people in developing countries will feel that animal welfare concern is a “luxury” of the developed world where human needs are readily met, and that it shouldn't be imposed on them; particularly when raising animal welfare standards is perceived as impractical or costly to achieve. Others (e.g. people I met in Beijing, China) see animal welfare concern as one of the features of a developed nation, and so as something they should aspire to generate as part of their own country's development.

Try to gauge local feeling, again by meeting and talking with locals, so that your welfare goals can be achieved in ways that are compatible with local resources and beliefs. This will lead to greater implementation, and a greater likelihood of your good work being continued after you've boarded the plane and left the country.

A note on incentives

Animal welfare concern, like conservation concern, has arisen because of Man's “success” as a species, and his proliferation in unseemly numbers on a planet with finite resources. From the foregoing section it will be apparent that an ethical analysis is required to decide how the needs of humans and animals should best be met, and how a balance can be struck between the two. Do remember, however, that meeting the welfare needs of both humans and animals are not necessarily mutually exclusive tasks – and often are quite the opposite; there are many instances where raising animal welfare standards can lead to human benefits as well. An example would be the increased productivity that can be achieved from farm animals with good welfare, compared to those whose productivity is diminished by the physiological effects of chronic stress. It is important to identify these mutual benefits in any project you are involved with, and use them to motivate the changes you are aiming for.

Change of any kind relies on incentives for people to act. If people can be given an incentive to act in a given way, a reason for them to want to do so, then it is more likely that they will. Try to think about the animal welfare issues you are going to be involved with, and how their solutions could benefit the people associated with them; i.e. what incentives you, or your overseeing charity or funder, could offer them. Implementation of suggested

solutions to problems is generally achieved by one of 2 methods: education and legislation (as in the “carrot and stick” analogy); where possible, you encourage people to do things because you can demonstrate to them that it’s a useful or valuable thing to do (e.g. via education), and when this fails you introduce sanctions, via legislation, as a deterrent to a certain course of action or lack of it.

It is probably unlikely that you will get involved with legislation when volunteering, but once you can see how your welfare objectives could help local people as well as animals (i.e. could offer incentives to act), so that the people will implement your work and continue when you’ve gone, then get involved, yourself, with education and communicating these benefits, perhaps by volunteering to give talks (e.g. at local schools). If you are working with a charity, arrange this via their education or media personnel, but do check that what you have in mind is in keeping with their policies and protocols.

My experience of such an approach is to have been welcomed by the host groups as a representative of the UK: a country with long-established animal welfare legislation (yet to be introduced in some countries) and a well-known reputation for widespread positive public sentiment towards animals. In addition to this, you are a vet, or vet student; i.e. someone who has direct experience of working, back at home, in this “animal friendly” culture. Take plenty of photos/photo CDs/slides with you from home: of pets in homes, of nest-boxes provided for birds and other wild animals, etc.

You will find that people are keen to learn what such a culture is like, will ask many questions, and you will gain the rewarding experience of having played a small, but valuable, part in promoting animal welfare in a developing country.

Conclusions

- Remember the Five Freedoms framework, and use it to structure your animal welfare work at home and abroad
- Remember that developing societies may have many human problems, and animal welfare may be low on their list of priorities when you arrive in-country
- Remember also, however, that improving animal welfare can confer humanitarian benefits
- Remember to use these benefits to motivate change – identify genuine incentives to recruit local support, that will ensure your work is continued when you leave the country
- Take images depicting positive human-animal relationships with you when you travel – they can make the unlikely seem possible

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Further information

On global animal welfare issues:

Animal Welfare, Global Issues, Trends and Challenges (2005); Eds Bayvel ACD, Rahman SA and Gavinelli A; OIE

On animal welfare generally:

Animal Welfare: A Cool Eye Towards Eden (1995); Webster J; Blackwell Science

Animal Welfare: Limping Towards Eden (2005); Webster J; Blackwell Publishing

Animal Welfare (1997); Appleby MC and Hughes BO (Eds); CAB International
Through Our Eyes Only? The Search For Animal Consciousness (1998); Dawkins MS; Oxford University Press

What Should We Do About Animal Welfare? (1999); Appleby MC; Blackwell Science

A more comprehensive list of references is available on request from the author:
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