BOOK REVIEW


The globalisation or internationalisation of animal welfare standards is a new and growing field, and the recent emergence of the World Organisation for Animal Health (Organisation International Epizootie or OIE) as the principal international body to oversee this is a welcome development. This 350-page scientific and technical review of global perspectives on animal welfare demonstrates the commitment of OIE to advancing this cause. Although resisted by some because of possible conflict with human welfare in developing countries or with cultural traditions, the development of international standards for animal welfare is seen by most as an essential safeguard, particularly where long-distance international transport is involved.

The review is distinguished by the breadth of its coverage, including novel contributions on aquatic animals and wildlife. However, it is more an up-to-date selection of relevant articles than a comprehensive coverage of topics, and the different styles of the many authors and the varied topics make it difficult to read cover to cover. The coordinators have made a special attempt to involve authors from around the world, including one Australian contribution on sea transport. The 27 chapters are divided into five principal sections: science based evaluation of welfare, global perspectives from different regions and various stakeholders, OIE standards and strategic issues. Most, but not all, of the articles are in English, with Spanish and French summaries. Unfortunately, a key regional article on the Americas is only in Spanish.

The review opens with Ian Duncan’s robust defence of the interpretation of welfare as an animal’s feelings, rather than its ability to cope with its environment, as commonly advocated by Donald Broom. This debate on the interpretation of animal welfare is particularly pertinent to the OIE’s international approach to welfare, with the Broom approach more likely to be favoured by veterinarians. I believe that there are flaws to both approaches – Broom’s approach ignores the endogenous influences, presuming that all animals will react in the same way, and Duncan’s approach fails to acknowledge that meaningful standards of animal welfare cannot be set if you rely just on an animal’s interpretation of its experiences. Two animals may have identical experiences, but due to different past history or genetics, may interpret their welfare to be at different levels. OIE, in attempting to set international standards on welfare, can only prescribe which experiences are acceptable and which are not. It is unfortunate that there was not a more balanced perspective on this crucial issue in this book.

Later chapters in the welfare evaluation section explore the relevance for different animal groups: companion, laboratory, aquatic, wild and captive animals. The global perspectives section is notable for a comprehensive and insightful chapter on the European position, which not only demonstrates the high importance that Europe attaches to improving animal welfare; it also advocates enhanced training, and, in particular, e-learning, as one of the key ways to achieve this. Chapters on the African, Middle Eastern and Asian/Oceanic situations are useful but tend to focus on local areas known to the authors rather than being a comprehensive coverage (which would take a book in itself). This tendency is again revealed in a chapter on the role of non-government organisations, which is followed by a rather general chapter on the World Veterinary Association. At points such as this, it is evident that the book would have benefited from a stronger editorial approach, rather than just coordination. There is a focus on animal transport and slaughter, with several chapters devoted to discussing the development of the new OIE guidelines, and some industry position statements – by the meat and livestock sector and the retail food industry – with the consensus not surprisingly being that welfare enhancement by codes of practice, rather than legislation, is preferable.

The final section on strategic issues focuses on the implementation of welfare assessment schemes (with a particularly erudite chapter by John Webster on this topic) and the place of animal welfare in world trade and in relation to food safety, environmental and pest control issues. Here are some of the best chapters of the book, even if a coherent theme is not obvious, as animal experimentation is again considered by several authors. This book is more than just a valuable addition to the animal welfare literature, it explores the position of OIE in relation to animal welfare in detail, and there is no doubt that this organisation is going to be an increasingly influential body. As such, anyone with an interest in how animal welfare is going to be furthered on an international scale in future will get great benefit from reading this book.

CJC Phillips
Professor Phillips is Director of the Centre for Animal Welfare and Ethics in the Department of Veterinary Sciences, University of Queensland, Brisbane.
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