

HUMANITY'S TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

Adopted by the Commission, December 1979

Biblical Background

We read in Gen 1:27,28 that after God had created the first human beings, he blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'. When God bestowed on Adam the honour of naming every living creature he emphasized the fact that human beings were on a higher level than all beasts and birds. (Gen 2:19,20). God announced to these two new creatures that he had provided them with every seed-bearing plant and fruit-bearing tree as their plentiful source of food. The birds and animals, too, were to live on this vast supply of plant food.

After this brief, idyllic (and vegetarian) existence had come to its end, human beings began keeping flocks of animals as well as tilling the soil, and obviously God did not protest about his use of animals for food, clothing and sacrifices (Gen 3:21). After the Flood, God repeated to Noah and his sons his original blessing on man, and declared again that humankind is the pinnacle of His creation and that it has power over all other creatures. (Gen 9:1-3). God permitted the killing of animals for food and clothing and allowed them to be used for labour; he also required human beings to make sacrifices of animals and birds. A few Old Testament passages encourage kindness and care toward domestic animals (eg Deut 25:4) and wanton cruelty was prohibited.

The New Testament contains very few references to the treatment of animals. After God's great sacrifice of his Son, he no longer required animals to be sacrificed. Various passages seem to proclaim that people are free to kill and eat whatever creatures they wish. Although there are very few direct instructions about human treatment of animals in the Bible, the underlying tone and implication are that people will value all parts of God's creation. Throughout the Old and New Testaments it is clear that birds and animals are honoured and admired creatures. Figurative language involving animals abounds; frequent imagery and numerous parables are based on the implied principle that wild creatures are to be respected and domestic animals are to be well cared for. The twenty-third Psalm, for example, depends for its significance and deep appeal, on the loving, watchful, dedicated care of the shepherd for each individual animal in his flock. Several parables reflect this care and concern and Jesus himself is the 'Lamb of God'.

Humanity's Response

If people appreciate and respect all the other creatures that God has made, they will treat them with care and kindness wherever possible. They will not tolerate cruelty, and will attempt to inflict a minimum of pain and hardship on any animal. This principle or ideal should hold in every area where people exert their dominance over other creatures — in using and killing them for food, clothing and fashion; in using them for labour, sport and entertainment; in trying to control the balance of their numbers in their environment; and also, in more recent times, in making use of animals in a vast range of scientific experiments, tests and research.

Throughout the world of nature one species depends on another for sustaining its life and existence. Human beings, too, will make use of, depend on, and control other species, including animals. But the following facts will make us feel deep concern and responsibility in our treatment of animals:

- (1) If we praise God for the amazing variety, beauty, balance and order in the whole of creation, it is logical that love, care and gentleness toward all parts of creation will follow.
- (2) God has given people the intellect and will to enable them to make choices and decisions. Wherever possible he would expect us to choose to respect life and lessen suffering rather than engage in callousness and cruelty.
- (3) We ourselves feel pain, suffering, hunger and fear very keenly and would therefore want to inflict a minimum of such experience on to other sentient beings.
- (4) Our growing awareness of issues like pollution and conservation should also make us wish to preserve and respect life on all levels, rather than damage and injure it.

Killing Animals for Food

In view of the uncountable number of animals which are constantly being killed by people for food, we should be alert to the principle of inflicting as little pain and suffering as possible in killing them by hunting, trapping, or slaughtering. In Old Testament times when Jewish law was laid down, the method of ritual slaughter was probably the least painful method available. In modern times much more humane slaughtering is possible; the practice of stunning the animal by electric current or a captive-bolt pistol before cutting its throat is preferable to the use of the primitive and brutal pole-axe method or to ritual killing.

Domestic Animals and Pets

Respect and thoughtfulness for domestic animals and pets should result in humane treatment of them and awareness of their needs. Detailed guidelines for the care and protection of a wide range of birds and animals are printed in the handbook of the RSPCA. These provisions are not extreme or sentimental, but reasonable and scientifically well-informed.

Modern Developments

In modern times, human beings have added huge new fields of activities in their dealings with animals. In pursuing scientific studies aimed at helping humanity (in theory, at least), and in advancing human knowledge, people now make wide use of animals in these ways:

- (1) vivisection and dissection;
- (2) as 'guinea-pigs' in the testing of new drugs and products for use as medicines, insecticides, cosmetics, cleaning materials, etc;
- (3) for psychological and behavioural tests; and
- (4) in high-pressured, artificially-maintained 'factory farming' and food production.

As God has placed human beings above all other species it appears that people are justified in making some use of animals in these fields, providing every effort is made to conduct all research and experiments as humanely as possible. Laboratory use of animals may be permissible in cases where it is clear that work with these animals will benefit the health, well-being and safety of humanity. It is probably especially warranted when an urgent, widespread human problem is being tackled (eg poliomyelitis, some years ago). But no person has the right to inflict unnecessary pain on any other creature. For this reason it is essential that all research workers using animals for experimental purposes should be governed by a thoroughly prepared code of principles and practices. Christians would be able to endorse a document such as 'The Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals in Research in Australia' prepared by the NHMRC and the CSIRO. They would also hope that there is an effective means of enforcing adherence to such guidelines.

This particular set of guidelines is based on the principle that 'the lives of animals, especially vertebrate animals, should be treated with respect and care and their welfare should be catered for at all times'.

The code makes the following statements:

The impact of proposed research on the lives and welfare of animals should be taken into account in deciding whether the experiment is sufficiently important to be carried out. Accordingly, experiments on animals should not be performed except to seek knowledge that is new and significant, or to achieve essential scientific and educational objectives that cannot be gained in any other way. Experiments using animals should be conducted only when the aims of the research cannot be achieved by methods or techniques other than animal experimentation.

Research workers and technicians should aim at developing skills for performing all procedures quickly and efficiently to minimise trauma and stress.

It must be assumed that mammals, and possibly other vertebrates also, experience pain in a manner similar to man and that the indications of need for analgesia and anaesthesia are parallel to those accepted in human medical treatment.

With due regard to the statistics required to ensure a valid result, investigations should be planned with care so that the number of animals subjected to experimental procedures is kept to a minimum.

Before embarking on research projects which necessarily involve inflicting severe discomfort or pain, such as some studies of pain itself, or of injury or shock, the investigator should carefully consider whether there is sufficient justification for undertaking the project.

Conscientious and convinced observance of such principles would ensure that the use of animals in scientific research does not become abuse. It would also guard against the situation where animals might be submitted to extremely frightening and painful tests in order to permit the manufacture of certain new products for which there is no actual need (eg some cosmetics, household sprays, food additives).

The treatment of animals in some methods of 'factory farming' should be assessed, because thousands of animals are being denied the basic functions normal to their species, such as the ability to lie down, to turn about, to stretch the body, or to graze on grass. Masses of eggs, chickens, veal, pork may be produced, but the dignity of the creature is utterly destroyed. This high-pressured method of food production is especially dubious when the end product is not a basic food but an extravagant delicacy such as gourmet veal or pork or a specialised liver dish.

Numerous alternative experimental methods are now being developed which do not involve hurting animals, eg tissue and cell cultures, radionuclide techniques, modelling and computer simulations. Increasing use of such methods, where they can be applied, is to be encouraged.

There is a growing awareness of the danger of certain species of birds and animals becoming extinct through human greed, vanity, carelessness or ignorance. Measures to protect threatened species deserve the Christian's concerned interest.

Conclusion

We recognise that it is one of the tragic effects of the coming of sin into the world that perfection and complete harmony are impossible in humanity's relationship to animals. Person-to-person, human-to-animal, animal-to-animal relationships have all suffered through the admittance of evil into God's created world. In Romans 8 Paul reminds us of the groaning of the whole creation. As Christians, we hope and long for the time when animals, too, will be freed from pain, fear and suffering.