

Animal welfare and pest control: Where are we now?

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Abstract

We have come far in our concern for pest animal welfare – but have we done enough? Pest animals are as capable of experiencing pain and distress as a result of human intervention as domesticated species. Concern for their welfare used to be primarily the domain of animal welfare non-governmental organisations. While legislative coverage remains light relative to other animal welfare issues, there are several initiatives that should lead to improved pest welfare. Principles for ensuring pest control is humane (ie having the least possible negative impact on animal welfare) have been proposed in the past. It is timely to review these and consider how they might be further progressed and implemented. The improved gathering and sharing of information between countries on the animal welfare impacts of different control tools, and on ways to implement changes, we believe would be a particularly useful step forward.

Introduction

Pest animals are no less capable of experiencing pain and distress than other animals. Indeed, they may experience more than other animals in some cases owing to the actions inflicted upon them and to the types and degrees of suffering which they are capable of. This suffering has often been neglected for many reasons, especially because:

- it normally happens unseen and we can therefore ignore it, remain ignorant of it, or convince ourselves that we are not to blame for it;
- it can be easily justified on the basis of the needs of human and domestic animal health and wellbeing being more important than those of pests;

- it is sometimes discounted because wild animals are subject to similar levels of suffering and a less than ideal manner of death in their daily lives;
- cases of domestic animal cruelty or animal treatment where the human cause is clearer or the treatment easier to effect are more easily tackled.

Thus, while some animal welfare non-governmental organisations have been concerned about pest animal welfare for a long time, it still often receives little national or government attention: it was far-reaching of Australia to include wild animals in its Animal Welfare Strategy – even more so for it to tackle the humaneness of pest control methods immediately. It is the purpose of this paper to look at where we are now and to think about where we want to be in the future, and how we might get there.

Where are we now?

Concern about leg-hold and other traps had already led to attempts to develop international guidelines, when in the mid 1990s, the Royal New Zealand SPCA expressed concern about the use of phosphorus paste for possum control. It had heard reports about poisoned possums ‘screaming in pain and falling from the trees’. Funding was secured for a programme of work to investigate pest welfare and compare the animal welfare impacts of all of the poisons currently used for possum control in New Zealand. This ran alongside work assessing the welfare impacts of traps according to guidelines (then draft) developed by the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee on the basis of the earlier international discussions (www.biosecurity.govt.nz/animal-welfare/nawac/policies/guideline09.htm), improving trap performance in terms of target and non-target animal welfare and developing more humane traps.

Around the same time, a zoo in the United Kingdom was considering rodent control and wanted to reassure the public that its treatment of pests was as humane as its treatment of its exhibits. It commissioned an animal welfare scientist to review the humaneness of the available rodent control methods. This in turn led to a collaboration with New Zealand to produce a substantive review of what was known about the humaneness of rodent control methods (Mason and Littin 2003).

Shortly after this, the RSPCA in Australia ran its seminar and follow-up workshop ‘Solutions for Achieving Humane Vertebrate Pest Control’, with recommendations arising to develop a national approach to humane vertebrate pest control

(www.rspca.org.au/events/seminar2003.asp). This, of course, was actioned by the inclusion of wild animals in the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy. It is gratifying today to see progress under this Strategy in the form of a report that describes a model for assessing the relative humaneness of pest control methods. This model will be useful worldwide.

Coverage in legislation remains patchy, but there are some firm moves being made to improve the humaneness of pest control by various means. These range from better regulation to the offering of humane pest control services by an animal welfare NGO. Some examples are:

- The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), which develops guidelines and standards for animal welfare for its more than 170 member countries, has created a guideline for the management of stray dogs (primarily as a means of limiting the spread of zoonoses). It may tackle further wild animal welfare issues in the future (www.oie.int/eng/bien_etre/en_introduction.htm).
- New Zealand has recently introduced regulations to restrict the use of leghold traps and is considering regulations to restrict the use of glueboards.
- Austria is considering whether to ban glueboards for pest control.
- Snares have been under the spotlight in the UK (see www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/vertebrates/snares and www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2008/02/20125138).
- The Humane Society of the United States, a long-time advocate of humane pest control, has launched a “wildlife-conflict solution service” which aims to put the HSUS principles on humane pest management into practice (see www.hsus.org/wildlife/urban_wildlife_our_wild_neighbors/solving_problems/humane_control/humane_wildlife_services.html).
- The Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of British Columbia in Canada, and the Animal Welfare Foundation of Canada, jointly sponsored a workshop in 2007 intended to develop a framework to guide people in pursuing both conservation (including pest animal management) and animal welfare concerns (www.interactions.pwias.ubc.ca).
- The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare, a UK animal welfare charity, ran a workshop on rodent control methods, which has led to an ongoing collaboration between regulators, academics and pest control practitioners. They aim to review

the need for better regulation of pest control humaneness (particularly in regard to trap design), to consider means of increasing public education on the welfare impacts of pest control and best practice, and to identify research needs, especially those aimed at improving existing methods and finding more humane novel methods (www.ufaw.org.uk/latest-news.php#n03a).

- There will be papers on the application of animal behaviour to the management, control and humane killing of pest and feral animals (possibly including assessments of killing methods) at the next international congress of the International Society for Applied Ethology which will be held in Australia (see www.isae2009.com).
- Attention continues to be paid to pest control methods by animal welfare and animal rights organisations (see, for example, the campaign against glueboards being run by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, www.helpinganimals.com/wildlife_glueTraps.asp).

Where do we want to go?

Littin et al (2004) proposed several principles to ensure that pest welfare is adequately considered in the development of any pest control programme and to ensure that pest welfare continues to be improved. These were discussed and expanded upon in the RSPCA Australia workshop 'Solutions for Achieving Humane Vertebrate Pest Control', noted above. Briefly, the main principles are (HVPC Working Group 2004):

1. The aims or benefits and the harms of each control program must be clear. Control should only be undertaken if the benefits outweigh the harms.
2. Control should only be undertaken if there is a likelihood that the aims can be achieved.
3. The most humane methods that will achieve the control program's aims must be used (this requires an assessment of the humaneness of all existing methods).
4. The methods that most effectively and feasibly achieve the aims of the control program must be used.
5. The methods must be applied in the best possible way.
6. Whether or not each control program actually achieved its aim must be assessed.

7. Once the desired aims or benefits have been achieved, steps must be taken to maintain the beneficial state.
8. There should be research to reduce the negative animal welfare impacts of existing control methods and to develop novel methods that cause less pain and distress.

We are still some way from ensuring that the above principles, or something like them, are considered whenever pest control is conducted. These can still be reasonably regarded as goals to aim for.

What do we need to do?

It would be worthwhile considering how the above principles could be further implemented. We believe there needs to be the encouragement of further development of these, or similar principles, to guide the improvement of animal welfare in pest control worldwide. As a minimum, there needs to be further encouragement of anyone conducting pest control operations (including household users) to at least consider animal welfare, if not use the most humane method possible. To do this, there needs to be a good understanding or consensus on the relative humaneness of available tools. The application of the Australian model, mentioned above, to assess relative humaneness will provide significant progress. However, a concern over lack of knowledge should not be a barrier to starting an assessment as there is much that can be learned from extrapolation of existing information. Also, this knowledge needs to be provided to the public. One initiative of the UFAW rodent control group discussed above is to produce guidance for the public on humane control methods.

Regulators can improve pest animal welfare by requiring a consideration of animal welfare in the assessment of any control method for use in a particular country. As a minimum, information that could be used to make such an assessment could be requested, even if the animal welfare assessment itself does not influence the decision on whether to allow the eventual use of the control method.

In terms of the development of more humane tools, there is at least interest expressed by commercial companies in developing more humane tools and in improving the humaneness of existing tools. Commercial organisations could be made aware that animal welfare can be used as an effective marketing tool, even when it comes to pest

control.

We believe some means of better sharing experiences between countries would be extremely useful. The Vertebrate Pest Committee, with representation from Australia and New Zealand, is effective for Australasia. It would be good if there was a similar conduit for information sharing between other countries. This will be particularly true as more and more methods are 'tested' for their impacts on animal welfare and the information will be useful for several countries.

It would be helpful if there was less focus on whether some particularly contentious methods (such as 1080, sodium monofluoroacetate) are or are not humane, and more focus on accepting that some tools are less humane (cause more pain or distress) than others and should only be used where absolutely necessary, and that other tools should be developed that are more humane.

Summary and conclusions

We have come far in the last 10 years in terms of our acceptance of pest welfare as a reasonable concern. However, it is now time to turn a changed mindset into changed actions. The improved gathering and sharing of information between countries by some means might be a particularly useful step forward.

References

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