

Animal welfare issues associated with extensive livestock production: The northern Australian beef cattle industry

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Abstract

The animal welfare issues faced by the northern Australian beef cattle industry are similar to those faced by extensive livestock production industries in other countries. However, northern Australia is characterised by climatic extremes and large areas/distances and these factors, together with low management inputs, mean that the industry faces significant challenges to assure high standards of animal welfare. In this review, the following issues are discussed: behavioural restriction; ‘natural disasters’; nutrition; health; a number of aspects relating to human–animal interactions, particularly mustering (gathering/rounding up) and moving cattle, and the consequences for welfare of the timing and frequency of handling; ‘surgical’ procedures; identification; transportation, including live export; and predation.

The use of cattle adapted to the northern Australian environment alleviates many potential welfare problems. In addition, significant improvements to animal welfare could be made very quickly with a few straightforward management changes, such as improved planning for extended dry periods and drought; wider use of conservative stocking rates and supplementary feeding; broader implementation of vaccination programs; and greater implementation of weaner training programs. Further, a dramatic improvement for very large numbers of cattle could be made through the selection and use of polled genotypes to eliminate horned cattle.

Research from Europe suggests that current Australian recommendations for the duration of land transportation journeys may be excessive and could compromise welfare, but further research under northern Australian conditions is required. Research and development is also needed in non-invasive alternatives to castration and spaying, but in the meantime the welfare of males could be improved by castrating earlier in the animals’ lives. However, it is acknowledged that this would require major changes to current cattle management practices.

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Further research and development is required in relation to animal handling, and in particular the type, timing and frequency of experiences with stockpeople and also, on the assembly and sea transportation of cattle. Finally, a moral question exists as to whether cattle should continue to be exported to a particular country for which there is strong evidence of inhumane treatment.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the welfare of beef cattle in northern Australia, but many of the welfare issues are similar for extensive, grazing, livestock production systems of other species and in other parts of the world. For example, the climatic conditions in both northern Australia and Canada may pose a threat to livestock welfare through thermal stress and food shortages. However, the northern Australian situation is often an extreme example, as a consequence of the low-input nature of cattle management practised on many properties; in other parts of the world large herds are grazed on large areas of land, but there are more stockpeople (e.g. Brazil), or cattle are intensively managed for part of the year (e.g. in Canada during the winter).

This paper will consider only those welfare issues that are an integral part of extensive cattle production and will not deal with matters, such as disruption of social relationships, changes of management and pre-slaughter handling that are common to most livestock production systems. Transportation is an issue relevant to all livestock production systems, and will be mentioned briefly because northern Australian conditions have particular potential to impact on welfare. In addition, Australia also exports large numbers of live cattle by sea and the vast majority of these animals are sourced from extensive grazing systems. Therefore, the welfare issues associated with this live export will be discussed under the topic of transportation.

It should be remembered that livestock production is a business and the animal welfare issues associated with it, regardless of whether it is extensive or intensive production, are primarily driven by the forces of finance and practicability. If there were no financial and practicable constraints associated with livestock production then there would be few, if any, animal welfare problems. However, the livestock industries must consider that consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about the care and management of the livestock that produce the food and fibre that they buy, and these concerns appear to be playing an increasingly important role in purchasing behaviour (Blandford and Fulponi, 1999; Verbeke and Viaene, 1999, 2000; Jago et al., 2000). If the livestock industries wish to maintain their markets (locally and globally) it is incumbent upon them to assure high standards of animal welfare within any practicable and financial constraints.

2. Brief profile of northern Australia and the beef industry

In line with the Australian beef industry's definition, in this review, northern Australia is the area encompassing the state of Queensland, the Northern Territory and the Kimberley/

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