

## **OPINION – ACSSO's Guest Columnists address values-driven issues in education**

*Gandhi said "the greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated" – not just its people. In 2005 the Australian Government through Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry issued the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy to establish practical, effective and humane animal welfare standards and set directions for future improvements in the welfare of animals(\*). **Guest columnist Carole de Fraga** reflects on the issues and responsibilities raised by recent accounts of appallingly cruel practices – and other less apparent but disturbing instances of disregard and indifference to the well-being of animals in our society.*

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### **Values Education supporting the well-being of animals in a caring and compassionate society**

On television recently, Channel 9's 60 Minutes exposed abhorrent cruelty to cattle at Cairo's Bassatin abattoir. Pre-slaughter treatment included the slashing of animals' tendons to disable and the stabbing of eyes to disorientate them. Australia has exported around 1 million live cattle to Egypt over the past ten years, most of them slaughtered in this facility. The live trade to Egypt is now suspended, due to the extreme cruelty revealed.

Peak national animal welfare body Animals Australia, who provided much of the footage to 60 Minutes, subsequently released evidence of similarly cruel treatment of Australian sheep and cattle following export to other countries in the Middle East (ME).

Animals Australia's material was gathered during an investigation in the ME, carried out by the organisation's Lyn White in December 2005 and January 2006.

Those who have seen images from this investigation are understandably shocked. But media exposure other than the occasional Letter to the Editor has been scarce and one may well suppose discouraged due to the powerful interests that support the live export trade.

However, the topic is becoming more newsworthy. The Australian's Richard Yallop introduced his excellent feature 'Who talks for the animals?' on Saturday 11 March with graphic description from Lyn White's investigation. Such infamous and cruel exploitation of two of the most common of our farmed animals is now in the public domain; it will not only outrage, but surely cause those with any sense of moral and/or social responsibility to question community values in relation to the treatment of animals.

Many already have demonstrated their opposition to the live trade and called for its closure. Animals routinely die on board ship, calamities cause the suffering or death of entire consignments of animals and now the shocking treatment and slaughter of animals in countries who buy Australian animals, where there are

no laws to protect them from gratuitous cruelty, has been revealed. Signatures of over 130,000 people opposing the trade have been tabled in Federal Parliament in recent years, the petition process ongoing.

In our democratic society, animal welfare organizations research and investigate issues, inform the community and channel community opinion to decision makers. As part of this process, other professionals such as lawyers and educators are increasingly well informed and involved, adding their skills to the animal welfare debate.

**Care and compassion** is one of the original core values of the national framework for Values Education and fundamental to a caring society.[1] Among the most vulnerable are those able to experience fear, pain and suffering but who cannot speak for themselves. In this sector surely non-human animals are amongst the most vulnerable, yet we so often fail them. Export animals are one example; animals crammed into cages, crates and windowless sheds on factory farms for the production of ever cheaper meat and eggs are another.

In the Canberra Times in January this year, Professor Mirko Bagaric[2] said:

“There is no wriggle room on the animal cruelty front. It is unquestionably morally repugnant. Animals can’t speak in ways that we can understand. Their intellect is not high and they don’t have an awareness of themselves as continuing entities over time. Yet they are entitled to be treated with concern and regard because they possess the most important attribute that qualifies an entity for moral standing: the capacity to feel pain and suffer.

“Suffering is suffering, whether experienced by animals or humans. The physiological process is identical. It is always agonizing to endure and often as agonizing to observe.”

Yet a significant part of the problem of extending greater care and compassion to farm animals and securing welfare improvements is the fact that we do not observe their suffering. They are shut away behind closed doors, where we cannot see what they routinely endure. It is only due to the conviction and courage of those committed to exposing the origins of society’s cheap animal produce that we have iconic images of hens in battery cages, sows deprived of the ability to nurture their young in the cruel confinement of a farrowing crate and masses of ‘meat chickens’ or broilers on the floors of vast sheds for their six short weeks of life.

And until recently, the majority of us did not know what so many animals endure when exported to the ME. Now this information is emerging, the live export industry refutes the cruel reality of what it thought we would never know, claiming welfare improvements that have not been demonstrated to its critics and certainly not witnessed by investigators on random visits to overseas slaughter facilities.

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Professor Bagaric continues:

“More enlightened future generations will regard the callous disregard with which we treat animals as on a par with the repugnant ways that our forefathers treated groups such as women and people with dark skin.”

We trust this is so, but if it is to be, then values education must naturally extend to include the plight of animals and their needs. As a guide for farm animal well-being, the British Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) has formulated the following widely accepted principles, known as the Five Freedoms[3]:

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

They are such basic and just requirements, yet still a distant privilege for so many farm animals.

And our values need to extend beyond care and compassion. We must **respect** the needs of non-human animals, which, if in different contexts, are similar to our own and integral to their well-being.

We need to recognize our **responsibility** to the animals in our care and behave with **integrity** to ensure that they are afforded what they need to enjoy quality of life in an environment increasingly pressured by economics. They provide the food and clothing that so many of us take for granted. Certainly, in this context alone, we have a fundamental responsibility towards them.

And we need to recognize our responsibility to pass on these values to the children in our care, so that society does become more compassionate and principled and mindful of its own responsibilities. Then perhaps we will have the enlightened future generations that Professor Bagaric anticipates.

Carole de Fraga, Regional Representative – Oceania

Compassion in World Farming

March 9, 2006

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## Notes & References:

- 1 <http://www.valueseducation.edu.au/values/default.asp?id=8757>
- 2 Mirko Bargaric, 'Shameful Japanese not alone', *The Canberra Times*, Jan 9, 2006, p.11. Professor Bargaric is the Head of Deakin Law School.
- 3 <http://www.fawc.org.uk/freedoms.htm>

(\* ) Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry: You can find a range of information about the **Australian Animal Welfare Strategy** and download the document at:

<http://www.affa.gov.au/content/output.cfm?ObjectID=3C9C4ACE-B85B-465C-9C508C771F08C87E> Funding for education and training has been provided and a working group representing each animal sector will develop action plans to implement all areas of the strategy and continuously improve animal welfare in and affecting Australia – check the site for future developments.

**Compassion in World Farming** seeks to achieve the global adoption of agricultural systems which meet the welfare needs of farm animals, including the end of intensive factory farming, in the belief that this will also benefit humanity and our environment. Humane education can play an essential part in achieving an outlook based on human ethics and values that can overcome violence, poverty and environmental degradation. Humane education encourages compassion and respect for people, animals and the environment and recognises the interdependence of all living things. It is the basis for respect and understanding of other human beings and all life. Website: <http://www.ciwf.org>

**Animals Australia** is the national peak body for animal support groups sharing the belief that activities that cause animal suffering are unnecessary and unjustified, and where people work together to minimise and eliminate such suffering. Website: <http://www.animalsaustralia.org> The site provides detailed reports from Communications Director Lyn White of investigations in the Middle East, which reveal extensive evidence of unacceptable practices in the handling and slaughter of animals, including detailed background accounts of the cattle practices reported on 60 Minutes

**Voiceless** is an organisation which works to promote respect and compassion for animals, increase awareness of the unacceptable aspects of the conditions in which they live and take action to protect animals from suffering. Voiceless gives grants to organisations that share their purpose, provides education particularly to young Australians, and works to modify or create policies and laws which protect animals. Website: <http://www.voiceless.org.au>

Nobel laureate and **Voiceless** patron J.M.Coetzee writes: *“Steadily and not so slowly any more, we are making progress. One day, not in our lifetime perhaps but in a future that is not unforeseeable, animals of non-human species will be born into a world in which they stand a fair chance of living a life that is happy by their own standards and fulfilling. When that day comes they will not look back with gratitude to the human being who helped them to make this dispensation possible, that is to say, who helped to restore a decent life to them. But that does not matter. We are a species whose nature it is to look back; other species have what they consider to be more important things to do*

*with their time than looking back. Voiceless acts in the most practical of ways to fund projects across the country whose goal is to ameliorate the lives of animals. Voiceless is a small part of what has become a large and I would hope irreversible movement among human beings to make this planet a less harsh and deadly place for all those to whom it is the one and only home."*