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A Good Animal Life: Bringing awareness of animal sentience into farming practice¹

Françoise Wemelsfelder, Belinda Vigors and Alistair Lawrence²

Key message: The 'Good Life' concept is used increasingly by livestock industry stakeholders to indicate their aspiration to move towards high 'positive welfare' standards in UK animal production. However, scientifically this concept is relatively under-developed. Farmers tend to rely for guidance on well-embedded cultural farming symbols such as good feed, housing and health, but for further development of the 'Good Life' notion an untapped source is their direct lived engagement with animals as sentient beings. Greater accreditation of this relationship could increase well-being in both animals and farmers.

Main Findings

- The notion of 'A Good Life' is an aspirational standard for farm animal welfare that was first articulated, but not clearly defined, in the 2009 FAWC report³. Recently Brexit and other factors such as the need for Green Recovery strategies have stimulated industry interest in this concept. This briefing summarizes work aimed at clarifying the meaning of A Good Life for farm animals, integrating outcomes from two scientific reports produced for the RESAS programme, as well as insights gained through engagement with UK retailer livestock supply chains.
- A review of the scientific literature concerned with the animal Good Life concept indicated that despite its intuitive appeal the concept remains relatively underdeveloped. It is unresolved how to investigate what animals value in life beyond their basic biological fitness. This makes it difficult to identify the kind of conditions farmers need to provide for their animals to have a Good Life, and also how to assess a Good Life across the animals' life-span.
- A paper examining 'Good Farmer' ideals found that farmers primarily see good animal welfare as something they (often unconsciously) 'do', where what they 'do' is influenced by wider farming cultural ideals of what indicates a Good Farmer rather than a set of cognitive guidelines. Farmers frequently articulate the relational nature of success in this context: a happy animal makes a happy farmer and vice versa – welfare is *co-produced*.
- Farmers' reliance on implicit cultural identities can act as a conservative force, impeding welfare improvements even in the face of scientific evidence. However, farmers' daily practical engagement with animals can also be mobilised to more consciously attend to animals' perspectives and improve their living conditions. For example QBA, a method for assessing animal emotional expressivity developed at SRUC, has been adopted by Waitrose supply chains for this purpose and been welcomed by participating farmers.
- Such attunement to animals as sentient beings is a form of behavioural change that underlies and can support the development of scientific definitions. Government can do much to promote the notion of A Good Life by encouraging farmers and their organisations to bring awareness of animal sentience into their practice, for example through development of stockperson-ship training.

¹ This research was undertaken within the Scottish Government Rural Affairs and the Environment Strategic Research Programme 2016-2021, under Theme 2 Productive and Sustainable Land Management and Rural Economies, as a research deliverable on Increasing Uptake of Best Practice (2.3.12).

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³ [Farm Animal Welfare in Great Britain – Past, Present and Future.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

Introduction

The Good Life concept was first articulated by FAWC in 2009 as signifying a life of distinctly better quality than merely a 'life worth living'. In recent years, stimulated by factors such as Brexit and the need for Green Recovery strategies, this concept has begun to play a key role in livestock industry stakeholders' efforts to move farm animal welfare standards beyond minimum legal requirements⁴. It is an intuitively appealing concept, in that the word 'Good' has moral connotations suggesting animals are properly treated and their lives uncompromised. However, the science of 'positive welfare' supporting this concept is relatively young⁵, with ambiguities surrounding the Good Life concept which, if it is to function with integrity in the public domain, require clarification and further work.

Methods

Investigation of the animal Good Life was approached from three different perspectives. First, the scientific literature concerned with the Good Life concept in animals was reviewed. Secondly, a sociological inquiry was conducted into farmers' views of what it means to be a Good Farmer. Thirdly, insights gained through engagement with Waitrose livestock supply chains were articulated and integrated with academic materials.

Policy and Industry Implications

In light of livestock industry stakeholders' growing interest to promote farm animals having a Good Life, this research:

- Advises industry stakeholders and policy makers to recognise the scientific complexity of what A Good Life stands for and be transparent in how they interpret it and intend to implement it.
- Finds that what farmers assume it means to be a Good Farmer frames their view of what a Good Life is for animals. Effective design of animal welfare standards and policies thus requires Good Farmer values to be taken into account.
- Suggests that, as farmers see good animal welfare as something they 'do', this practice can be mobilised to shift welfare standards and policies in a positive direction. Farmers' lived engagement with animals as sentient beings ('a happy animal makes a happy farmer') is an untapped resource for shaping a (shared) Good Life on farms.
- Indicates that Qualitative Behaviour Assessment (QBA) has the potential to facilitate this by encouraging farmers to attend to their animals' emotional expressivity and stimulate positive expressions. Ongoing QBA work with Waitrose supply chains shows that farmers welcome ownership of such a process.
- Indicates in sum that the Good Life concept should be developed and understood at different complementary levels. Explication of measures and environmental resources by scientists is important, but active empowerment of farmers to assimilate the Good Life into the moral fabric of their farming practice is essential. Government policies and grant projects can do much to encourage this, for example through development of targeted stockperson-ship training courses.



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⁴ Rowe, E. and Mullan, S. 2022. Advancing a "Good Life" for Farm Animals: Development of Resource Tier Frameworks for On-Farm Assessment. *Animals* 12, 565.

⁵ Lawrence, A.B.; Vigors, B.; Sandøe, P. 2019. What is so positive about positive animal welfare? — A critical review of the literature. *Animals* 9, 783.