

Is it animal welfare or animal well-being?

Understanding the distinction between welfare and well-being is important because it influences animal care, policy changes, and more.

by Alvaro Garcia

WHEN reading articles that mention animal welfare, I often find myself questioning the term. Is it the word “welfare” itself, and how it’s typically used in the context of humans, that feels somewhat off when applied to animals? Or is there another aspect of it that doesn’t quite align with my understanding of the term?

In today’s livestock agriculture, farmers and animal caretakers are expected to respect the conditions of how animals are cared for, allowing them to lead healthy, productive lives and manifest all their biological functions freely.

There is a difference

While both terms are often used interchangeably, they encapsulate distinct aspects of animal care that are key to ensuring the health, productivity, and ethical treatment of animals in farming environments. To clarify these concepts, it is essential to start with their most widely accepted definitions and the authoritative sources from which they derive.

Animal welfare: The World Organization for Animal Health Office International des Epizooties (OIE) defines animal welfare as “how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives.” This definition emphasizes the animal’s physical health, comfort, and ability to engage in natural behaviors.

Welfare is assessed by indicators such as disease prevalence, injury rates, and behaviors that signify distress or discomfort. This approach to animal welfare focuses on measurable outcomes that reflect the immediate health status and living conditions of the animal, aiming to ensure that basic needs are met and suffering is minimized.



ANIMAL WELL-BEING EXTENDS beyond the physical state to include the mental and emotional states as well.

The term “animal welfare” is widely used in both legal and scientific contexts to refer to the physical and psychological state of animals in relation to the conditions in which they live and die. It encompasses aspects of animal care that include proper housing, management, nutrition, disease prevention and treatment, responsible care, humane handling, and humane slaughter/harvesting.

“Welfare” often implies a human responsibility toward animals, focusing on the treatment and management practices imposed by humans on animals. It is a term that denotes a “human-centric approach,” emphasizing the ethical obligations humans have to ensure animals’ needs and welfare standards are met.

Animal well-being: On the other hand, animal well-being is a broader concept that extends beyond the physical state to include the mental and emotional states of animals. Although there is no single authoritative definition of animal well-being, it is generally understood to encompass the overall quality of life experienced by an animal, including its physical health, psychological state, and the fulfillment of its natural behaviors and needs. The American Veterinary

Medical Association (AVMA) suggests that animal well-being involves not only the absence of negative experiences such as pain and fear but also the presence of positive experiences such as comfort, pleasure, and interest in the environment.

Word choice matters

The distinction between both terms and concepts lies in their scope and focus. Animal welfare is primarily concerned with the animal’s physical state and its environment, aiming to prevent negative experiences and ensure basic needs are fulfilled. It is a critical baseline for ethical animal care and is often the focus of regulations and standards in the agriculture industry. Animal well-being, however, adopts a more holistic view, considering the animal’s mental and emotional health and striving for a state where animals can thrive, not just survive.

Understanding and prioritizing both animal welfare and well-being are fundamental to responsible livestock management. It ensures not only the humane treatment of animals but also contributes to the sustainability and efficiency of livestock practices. Healthy and content animals are more productive, exhibit fewer behavioral problems, and are

less susceptible to disease, highlighting the interconnectedness of ethical treatment and operational success.

This distinction matters because it can influence how policies are made, how animal care practices are developed, and how we conceptualize our relationship with animals. Focusing on animal well-being encourages a shift toward considering what is best for the animal from the animal’s perspective, potentially leading to more comprehensive and empathetic approaches to animal care and management.

Looking to the future

As livestock agriculture continues to evolve, the concepts of animal welfare and well-being remain at the forefront of discussions about ethical farming practices, animal rights, and sustainable agriculture. By adhering to the principles of both welfare and well-being, farmers and animal caretakers can meet the ethical standards expected by society while ensuring the health and productivity of their animals.

When crafting your next article, consider the terminology you choose and the message you want to convey. Are you framing your discussion within the context of human rules and regulations (welfare), or are you prioritizing the perspective of the animals themselves (well-being)? Selecting the appropriate terminology is crucial for effectively communicating your message and ensuring clarity and alignment with your intended audience. 🐮

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