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Jones, Peter ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9566-9393> and Comfort, Daphne (2021) Animal Geographies, Food Retailers, Fast Food companies and Animal Welfare. Geography, 103 (2). pp. 105-108. doi:10.1080/00167487.2021.1919415

Official URL: <http://doi.org/10.1080/00167487.2021.1919415>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00167487.2021.1919415>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/9195>

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ANIMAL GEOGRAPHIES: FOOD RETAILERS, FAST FOOD COMPANIES AND ANIMAL WELFARE

Peter Jones and Daphne Comfort

Introduction

During the past decade animal geographies have attracted increasing attention within the discipline. Sellick (2020, p. 22), for example, traced the development of animal geographies using the example of cattle and their relationships with space, place, and landscape, and she suggested that the driving force behind animal geography was *'how should humans treat animals in an ethical way'*, which puts animal welfare under the spotlight. That said, Buller (2016, p. 422) claimed that *'shopping for welfare-friendly food products becomes an act of care-at-a-distance.'* The separation between production and consumption also poses a challenge for the food retailers and fast food companies who are a prominent feature on the high streets and retail parks throughout the UK. While most of these food retailers and fast food companies are not involved in the raising, feeding, handling, transportation, or processing of animals, they are increasingly looking to respond to consumer concerns about animal welfare. This article looks to extend Sellick's work on cattle and to respond to Johnson's (2019, p. 139) call for animal geography to *'better understand the current construction and social negotiation of farm animal welfare.'*

Animal Welfare

The welfare of farm animals continues to generate vociferous and passionate debate. and it has attracted increasing attention in the academic literature. Clark et al. (2016), for example, recognised that increases in productivity may have negative impacts on farm animal welfare in modern animal production systems, and provided a systematic review of public attitudes to farm animal welfare. Their review suggested that *'the public are concerned about farm animal welfare in modern production systems'* and that *'naturalness and humane treatment were central to what was considered good welfare'* (Clark et al. 2016, p. 455).

Animal welfare is concerned with the general health and wellbeing of animals and spans a wide range of issues from the care of family pets, to the exploitation and abuse of animals. The welfare of animals generates fiercely contested debates and while some voices stress the vulnerability of animals, for example, in intensive factory farms and medical research, others emphasise the need to increase food supplies and to develop new and better medicines. Essentially, the concept of animal welfare is concerned with how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives, and it is generally seen to include three elements, namely, an animal's normal biological functioning; its emotional state; and its ability to express (most) normal behaviours.

As such, the American Veterinary Medical Association (2020, webpage) suggested that an animal is seen to be in *'a good state of welfare if (as indicated by scientific evidence) it is healthy, comfortable, well-nourished, safe, able to express innate behavior, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress'*, and argued that *'ensuring*

animal welfare is a human responsibility.’ More popularly, commitments to animal welfare are often characterised by the ‘Five Freedoms’, drawn up by the UK’s Farm Animal Welfare Council (2009, webpage), namely freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury or disease; freedom to express normal behaviour; and freedom from fear and distress.

Approaches to Animal Welfare

The leading food retailers and fast food companies within the UK have publicly expressed their commitment to animal welfare. Aldi (2020, webpage), for example, emphasised *‘animal welfare is an important part of being a responsible business and we are committed to the continuous improvement of animal welfare in our food and food products.’* In a similar vein, the Co-op (2019, p. 2) reported *‘we know that animal welfare is important to our customers and members, so we are committed to creating products that have been produced to good animal welfare standards, regardless of their budget.’* Within the fast food sector, ‘Restaurant Brands International (2019, webpage), whose brands include Burger King, claimed *‘our ongoing commitment is to monitor and require strong animal welfare practices throughout our global supply chain, including all our key land-based proteins: beef, dairy, pork, and chicken.’*

In making these commitments, the food retailers and fast food companies acknowledged the importance of their supply chains in addressing animal welfare. Sainsbury’s (2019, p. 3), for example, stressed its commitment to *‘working with our farmers to continuously improve the lives their animals lead’* and that all its have to meet *‘exacting animal health and welfare standards’*, and Asda (2017, webpage) claimed *‘we’re making improvements across our supply chain to make sure that livestock is treated properly at every step on the process.’* McDonald’s (2020, webpage) acknowledged *‘we understand our responsibility to improve the health and welfare of those animals in our supply chain throughout their lives.’*

More specifically, many of the leading food retailers and fast food companies have adopted policies for specific animals and animal products. Waitrose (2019, webpage), for example, claimed that all its beef is from British cattle, that *‘our farmers adhere to strict protocols to ensure the highest standards of husbandry and welfare to ensure stress-free, naturally produced healthy cattle’* and that *‘during spring and summer, our cattle are reared on open pasture in social groups and during winter protective shelter is made available in bedded barns.’* Subway (2019, webpage) outlined its policies on eggs, pork, beef and dairy cattle, and poultry. In addressing eggs, the company *‘aspires that animal welfare considerations are integrated in all aspects of the production process, and specifically focused on issues of housing and confinement, genetic selection of breeds, routine mutilations, feeding practices and male chick culling.’*

Many of the leading food retailers and fast food companies reported their commitment to auditing designed to ensure animal welfare. Sainsbury’s (2019, p. 3), for example, claimed *‘we implement our farm animal and welfare policies by working with independent auditors, suppliers and processors, and directly with our farmers’*, and Lidl (2020), emphasised that all its food suppliers are required to complete annual animal welfare audits. In a similar vein, in reviewing suppliers’ compliance with its animal welfare,

policy, Domino's (2019, webpage) reported that *'higher risk companies'* are audited *'at least every two years'*, while all other suppliers *'receive an audit at least every four years.'*

Reflections

The leading food retailers and fast food companies within the UK have policies on animal welfare but several issues merit reflection and discussion. Many of the commitments to animal welfare can be seen to reflect public concerns but given that the leading retailers and fast food companies source animal products across extensive geographical areas, fulfilling such commitments presents complex challenges. Not least in that commitments to continuous improvements in animal welfare may demand changes in current business models, which depend in part, on the large scale regular supply of cheap animal products. Here, Amos and Sullivan (2019, p. 8) suggested that *'customer willingness to pay continues to be the principal barrier to adopting higher standards of farm animal welfare.'*

At the same time, the leading food retailers and fast food companies' commitments to animal welfare are at least one step removed from their own operations, and this massively reduces their control over animal welfare. A major element in the leading retailers' approach to animal welfare is the regular independent audits of their suppliers. However, in examining consumer concerns about food safety, the environment and animal welfare, Haggarty (2009, p. 767) argued that audit-based governance is effectively shaped by the food industry itself, and that *'grocery marketers translate consumer preferences into checklists of acceptable farming practices in negotiation with farming sector lobbies, consumer groups and other participants in agri-food systems.'* More specifically, in reviewing the role of *'audit in animal welfare'*, Escobar and Demeritt (2016, p. 171) highlighted the general *'tendency for audit processes to become decoupled from the qualities they are meant to assure.'* As such, there is the danger that the audit exercises which the leading food retailers claim as a major feature of their corporate commitment to animal welfare, become a routine reporting end in themselves, rather than a means to an end.

More generally, the food industry faces strident criticism about animal welfare. World Animal Protection (2018, p.6) claimed p *'most of the 600 billion chickens farmed annually worldwide endure acute and severe suffering'*, that *'starting as new born chicks they are forced to reach their slaughter weight in about 40 days'*, that *'such unnaturally fast growth places an enormous strain on their young bodies'*, and that *'their lives are made even worse through cruel confinement in crowded, featureless and unnaturally lit sheds'* (World Animal Protection 2018, p. 3). More specifically, SubwayEatCruelty (2020, webpage), an alliance of animal protection groups, claimed that Subway *'promises its many customers that the foods it is offering are of high quality and were produced sustainably and with high ethical standards. However, the exact opposite is the case. The chickens that end up in Subway's sandwiches and salads have lived and died under excruciating conditions.'* Tescopoly (undated, webpage), for example, an alliance launched in 2006 to highlight and challenge the negative impacts of Tesco's behaviour along its supply chain, argued that *the capture and control of the whole food supply chain by the supermarkets is a major contributor to poor animal welfare.'*

At the time of writing, it is impossible to consider animal welfare issues in the food industry without reference to COVID-19, not least because the pandemic has disrupted global supply chains, heightened consumer awareness about the safety of animals within their food supply chains, and changed buying habits and behaviours. Looking to alternative futures, Plant Based News (2020, webpage), a UK based media outlet producing content about veganism and plant based living, for example, suggested that *‘with growing concerns about food safety in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and estimates that three out of every four new or emerging infectious diseases in people come from animals, it’s about time that food companies ramped up their efforts to prevent the spread of such diseases.’* Further, Plant Based News (2020, webpage) claimed that *‘the immune systems of animals raised on lower welfare factory farms are far weaker than any other; couple this with the immense overcrowding seen on these intensive farms - where some 90 percent of farmed animals are raised - and the risk of contracting and spreading dangerous diseases is worryingly high.’*

Conclusion

Some of the UK’s leading retailers and fast food companies are strategically committed to animal welfare, but their commitments are at least one step removed from their operations and this reduces their direct control over animal welfare measures. This has thrown the auditing of suppliers into sharp relief but there are concerns that audit processes may become exercises which are effectively decoupled from the process of ensuring animal welfare, and from animal welfare regulation. More generally, animal welfare will continue to be a controversial topic within the food industry, and it can be seen as part of the more general transformation of human beings’ relationships with animals, that lies at heart of the new animal geographies.

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