

Searching for the Animal of Animal Ethics

IX Annual Swedish Symposium on Biomedicine, Ethics and Society,
11-12 June 2007



A biological approach to the concept of natural behaviour

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Abstract (Poster presentation)

In the Swedish animal welfare act from 1988 the concept of “natural behaviour” was introduced: “Animals shall be accommodated and handled in an environment that is appropriate for animals and in such a way as to promote their health and permit natural behaviour.” (SFS 2003:1077). In policy documents from the industry the concept is often referred to. Why is natural behaviour important? Over the last decades, the knowledge of the behaviour and the mechanisms regulating behaviour in animals has substantially increased. Some of this research was initiated by the need to solve problems in industrial farming of animals, such as behavioural problems and diseases emerging from these. These, in turn, cause production losses as well as ethical dilemmas. Another reason for focusing on natural behaviour is that it often corresponds to the “gut feelings” many people have regarding what makes an animal happy, for example cows in green pastures or out-door pigs rooting in the soil. It is also a central concept in organic animal farming.

Behaviour can be used as an indicator of disease as well as of poor welfare. In this paper a model for natural behaviour is presented useful for assessing whether animals are kept in accordance with their behavioural needs and when deciding how to prioritize these needs in relation to housing regulations. The model is based on the definition of natural behaviour as the behaviour which the animal is strongly motivated to perform and which, when performed, gives a functional feed back to the animal.