



D'Silva, Joyce (2019) [Reflections on sheep rearing](#). *Animal Sentience* 25(5)

DOI: 10.51291/2377-7478.1438



This article has appeared in the journal *Animal Sentience*, a peer-reviewed journal on animal cognition and feeling. It has been made open access, free for all, by WellBeing International and deposited in the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org.



Reflections on sheep rearing

Commentary on [Marino & Merskin](#) on *Sheep Complexity*

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Abstract: Sheep rearing has an incredibly long history. Sometimes this alone can give credibility and status to a human practice. In the twenty-first century, it may be time to reassess our treatment of sheep and their place in nature. “Just because we’ve always done it” no longer has validity by itself. There are many other human practices which used to be accepted widely in certain societies and which we now may find abhorrent. With sheep intelligence now rightly regarded as an acceptable area of research within the academic community, it is a good time to reflect on our treatment of these animals and suggest possible alternative scenarios.

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Sheep rearing for meat and wool (and sometimes milk) has a long history within human agricultural activities. But the longevity of a practice does not in itself confer ethical status. “Just because we’ve always done it” no longer has validity. We have only to reflect on other long-standing human practices, such as slavery, subjugation of women, or infanticide and human sacrifice to realise this. The twenty-first century may be a good time to reassess our traditional use of sheep and their place in nature.

Traditional sheep rearing was in flocks where maybe one person could care for them, lead them to new pastures, and help with daily health and welfare problems. Slaughter may have been speedy and on site or nearby – a quick inversion (or in the case of lambs, being lifted up) and a knife to the throat. Today sheep are often raised in massive flocks, sometimes several thousand strong, belonging to one individual or company. Individual care is unlikely to be possible. We know that in the Australian outback, ewes having problematic births, or animals who have gone lame, are unlikely to receive treatment. Even in New Zealand, with its reputation for free range, pasture-based farming, “easy care lambing” is the norm. Ewes are left to lamb out on the range and if problems occur, they are unlikely to receive attention.

The timing of lambing has been manipulated by farmers to suit the market. Ewes may have melatonin sponges inserted into their vaginas to hasten oestrus and early lambing. Although indoor lambing is more common in the UK, hundreds of early lambs still die every year, many from hypothermia (Sheep Health and Welfare Group 2018/19).

Breeders aim for ewes to produce twin lambs to increase profitability. This inevitably results in more triplets being born, often with dire consequences for the health of the mother and of the lambs (Hindson and Winter 2002).

Sheep farming has quite literally become a global industry, with live animals or carcasses being traded from country to country and continent to continent. Lambs from Scotland may be trucked live to Greece and end up on tourist dinner plates in Athens, and sheep from Australia are shipped in their millions to countries in the Middle East every year, often with many dying on the way and the arrivals likely to face non-stun slaughter in their destination lands.

In 2017, the European Commission investigated the export of live animals (cattle, sheep and goats) from the European Union (EU) to Turkey. The findings were stark and emblematic of all that is wrong with long-distance transport. They concluded that “there is a high risk of unnecessary pain and distress for transported animals and a high risk for transporters to breach EU rules” (European Commission 2017).

Creating huge flocks has had devastating environmental impacts over the years, with desertification now becoming such a problem in Mongolia and northern China that the sheep are being moved into feedlots. Even in Wales, the hills have been transformed over the centuries, from forests to grazing areas, and over-grazing has denuded much of the pasture land itself.

Marino & Merskin (2019) have done sheep a service by bringing together the growing body of science which tells us how intelligent and emotionally aware sheep truly are. It is important that policy shapers and makers read their paper and that society is alerted to its findings in an appropriate way. The striking disparity between eating lamb chops for dinner and providing loving care and often vast amounts of money for the well-being of our companion animals needs to be realised. Only then may the practice of eating sheep be called into question.

Perhaps society may come to pay more regard to the welfare of the sheep they eat and purchase only sheep reared on high-welfare farms and where they can guarantee that the animal has been slaughtered with care and pre-stunning. Perhaps the horrors of the long-distance trade in sheep will be banned. Perhaps society will eventually abandon the eating of sheep and other currently farmed animals altogether.

Right now is a good time to reflect on these possibilities, and perhaps take action.

References

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