

# Meeting Public Educational Needs Through An Animal Welfare Student Group<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Students for the Responsible Use of Animals (SRUA) is a pro-agriculture animal welfare organization founded on the premise of humane treatment and responsible use of animals. The organization began in 1989 as an undergraduate student discussion group sponsored primarily by the Department of Dairy and Animal Science, The Pennsylvania State University. The organization informs students and the community about pertinent issues regarding the humane care and use of animals in farming systems and in agricultural, veterinary and biomedical research. Wildlife and international agriculture issues are also addressed. Major activities are organizing and staffing Farm Animal Learning Centers at the Pennsylvania Farm Show and Penn State's Agriculture Progress Days. Other activities include tours of farm and laboratory animal facilities; organizing animal care, use, and by-product displays; providing assistance to local animal welfare associations; leading elementary student tours of animal facilities; and attending forums on animal welfare. Meetings provide opportunities to discuss animal welfare issues with experts and critics.

## Introduction

Animal agriculture has been criticized by members of society who question humans' raising and using animals for food, power, fiber, and other purposes (Rifkin, 1992 and Robbins, 1992). Only 50 years ago, typical farming practices were familiar to many members of our society. Today, with fewer than 2% of the population of the United States directly involved in the production of food, (National Research Council, 1989), knowledge about farming has become the exception rather than the rule. Animal agriculturalists have become increasingly aware of the need for those involved with animal production to communicate with, and educate, the public about the practices employed in animal production (Curtis, 1987). The purpose of this paper is to summarize some of the issues central to the animal rights movement and

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to describe an organization that students at The Pennsylvania State University have established to respond to these challenges.

## Background

*Gauging Public Knowledge and Opinion.* Results of public surveys conducted in the past decade indicate the public is unclear about the nature of farming practices. In one survey, 71% of respondents felt that farmers generally take good care of their livestock (National Pork Producers Council, 1991). However, one-fifth of those surveyed felt too unsure about farmers' practices to give an opinion. The survey also indicated that people under age 40, those with education beyond high school, and those with annual incomes over \$25,000 are more likely to support animal rights concepts.

Similarly, another survey of adults and children concluded that although respondents could justify the humane and responsible use of animals in research, there was substantial confusion about the procedures of animal research (American Medical Association, 1989). Interestingly, 54% of adults responding believed that regulations exist regarding care, housing, and treatment of research animals; among these, 52% had a great deal to some confidence in the existing regulations. Only 26% of the children responding favored the use of animals in research, in contrast to 47% of adults. Children largely identified animals as "underdogs" and felt their use in research was unfair; 57% favored trying to stop the use of animals in research. A significant conclusion here is that education is important in determining people's attitudes about the details of this issue. These results suggest that those with less formal education tend to raise the value of animal rights higher than do better educated individuals; those with more education generally have a more positive attitude toward research. Similar conclusions were obtained in more recent surveys (Associated Press Poll, 1995; National Cattlemen's Association, 1995).

Kellert (1984) found children generally lacked knowledge about animals. Only 21% of children understood that veal does not come from lambs, 29% knew koala bears

are not really bears, and 26% knew a tern is not an insect. A significant conclusion from this work was an indication of progressive stages in the evolution of children's perceptions of animals. Those aged 6 to 9 experience changes in affective and emotional relationships with animals. Children aged 10 to 13 experience increases in cognitive and factual knowledge of animals. From 13 to 16 years of age, children experience a broadening of ethical concern about and ecological appreciation of animals.

*Exploring the Criticisms.* Rifkin (1992), a critic of animal agriculture, asserted that children of the industrial world have little relationship to, or understanding of, animals that are a regular part of their diets. He mentioned that children are often shocked upon seeing a beef carcass hanging in a butcher shop and maintained that they have grown up to think of meat as a "thing" - a material manufactured using the same processes that provide clothes, toys, and other things.

As Kellert (1984) indicated, children in today's society have less understanding of the processes associated with food production than those of previous generations. Perhaps this has less to do with people creating a series of barriers designed to distance themselves from the animals they eat, as Rifkin contended, and more with the Industrial Revolution. In a period of 200 years the populations of the United States and western Europe were transformed from largely rural to largely urban (Kotcher and Beck, 1987).

One tactic of some animal activists is to print facts and figures out of context accompanied by distorted descriptions of common animal production practices. Graphic, emotionally charged language is employed to incite the sensibilities of the public. Moreover, often it is the worst-case scenario that is described rather than the more common - and more humane - methods in practice on most farms.

*Addressing the Issues.* How can animal care issues be addressed using a pro-agriculture approach? Garrett (1984) suggested three possible reactions in challenging unsound viewpoints. The first and simplest response is to take no action at all. In so doing we assume contentions which are incompatible with scientific facts, and the thinking of the vast majority, will disappear with time and that reason will prevail. A second reaction is to challenge the objections with moral indignation and counter-criticism. The third and most appropriate response is to employ education and reason, which are two-way streets, and as such assume that "we" as well as "they" must be open and ready to learn and to act.

Curtis (1987) suggested three general approaches to the challenges of public ignorance and animal rights agendas. First, animal agriculture must have a well-organized, cohesive response. Second, educational

materials and programs for the public, especially youth, are needed to teach about animal production practices. Third, guidelines should be established for the care and use of animals in agriculture. The past 10 years have seen a significant increase in the number of animal care guidelines published by producer organizations and scientific animal agriculture societies.

Students for the Responsible Use of Animals (SRUA) advocates the response of education and reason, particularly oriented toward youth. It has become the goal of this student organization to promote the welfare of animals through the education of producers and the public.

## Activities of SRUA

An organization called Students for the Responsible Use of Animals began in 1989 as an undergraduate student discussion group at the Pennsylvania State University. A need was perceived for a forum to discuss animal welfare and animal rights concepts. Early on there was a limited exchange of ideas with the Alliance for Animal Rights, another student club already existing on Penn State's University Park campus. The new group's original name was Students for Animal Welfare (SAW), but this was changed in 1990 to SRUA. The club was recognized by Penn State's Undergraduate Student Government (USG) as an official student organization in 1991. Their slogan is "*students promoting animal welfare.*"

*Club Objectives.* SRUA has four stated objectives: 1) to promote the improvement of animal welfare; 2) to increase awareness of animal use in agriculture among students of the university and the community; 3) to bring about enhanced animal well-being; and 4) to emphasize the importance of animals in society.

These objectives are met through the club's activities, such as sponsoring campus speakers, touring farm and laboratory facilities, organizing educational displays, developing educational materials, interacting with the community, and coordinating the Farm Animal Learning Center at the Pennsylvania Farm Show and at Penn State's Agriculture Progress Days.

*Meetings and Speakers.* Meetings are held biweekly during the academic year. Most include a presentation by an invited speaker, focusing on a particular perspective of animal use, as well as a club business meeting. Speakers have been invited from different areas of animal use, including food animal production, wildlife conservation and rehabilitation, international agriculture issues, and agricultural, veterinary, and biomedical research.

Past speakers have included Dr. Temple Grandin, Colorado State University; Dr. Norm Wilkinson, Pennsylvania Society for Biomedical Research; Dr. Hugh Johnson,

American Farm Bureau Federation; and Jane Alleman, a Pennsylvania veal producer and then president of the American Veal Association. Members of the university faculty and staff and of the local community such as Robyn Graboski, wildlife rehabilitator, also regularly speak on current issues in animal care, use and well-being.

To increase the exposure of featured speakers, the club often holds joint meetings with other clubs on campus, including the Dairy Science, Block and Bridle, and Pre-Vet clubs and Sigma Alpha agricultural sorority. Joint meetings also offer an opportunity to better publicize SRUA and attract new members.

**Tours.** The club participates in tours of farms and laboratories as a means of educating members about contemporary animal care practices. Club tours of the sheep, beef, horse, dairy, swine, and deer centers at University Park campus and private enterprises prepare members to guide tours of these facilities for visiting elementary students.

Members have also toured New Bolton Center, the large animal clinic and hospital of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine and the Wistar Institute, a laboratory animal facility, both in the Philadelphia area. In 1993, members traveled to the Chicago area to participate in the Farm Animal Welfare Forum sponsored by the American Veterinary Medical Association. In conjunction with this, SRUA members toured the Hooved Animal Humane Society facility, Hoard's Dairyman Farm, and a Wisconsin veal farm. In 1995, members toured the Animal Welfare Information Center at the National Agricultural Library, the headquarters of the American Association for Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care, the animal facilities at the National Institutes of Health, and the National Zoo in the Washington, DC area.

**Educational Displays and Materials.** With education as a primary goal, the club has developed several standing exhibits for display at various events around the state. An animal by-products display contains examples or descriptions of well-known animal products which humans use, such as meat, milk, eggs, and wool, and less-well known items containing animal by-products, such as crayons, deodorants, plastics, perfumes, and glues. An animal care guidelines display lists guidelines which exist, explains why they are necessary, and where to send for information. The impact of animal agriculture on the environment is addressed in a myth/fact format display. Grazing, water use, global warming, and deforestation are addressed, and references are provided for further study and documentation. A comparative digestive system display shows and explains the differences in various kinds of farm animal digestive systems and provides general information about each species, including by-product feeds utilized by the animal and their

economic importance to Pennsylvania.

Twenty-seven brochures and seven newsletters have been published since 1991 in conjunction with Penn State's animal agriculture perceptions and education projects which are partially funded by research funds administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. "Welcome to a Farm" brochures are available to explain practices in dairy, veal, beef, sheep, swine, chicken, fish and horse production. "Let's Learn About" brochures are available about bees, rabbits, goats, milk, wool, eggs, leather, and assistance, working, and companion animals. Topics explored in "Pennsylvania Kids Care" newsletters include animal by-products, animals and the environment, air quality, agriculture and recycling, agriculture and water use, and "the environmentally-friendly steer." "What do you know about...?" brochures are available on current agriculture issues such as pesticides, water quality, waste disposal, insects, food safety, sustainability, animal welfare, deforestation, and farm safety. Fact sheets go hand-in-hand with the newer series of "What do you know about...?" brochures for more advanced readers. All of these publications are available to the public through Penn State's Department of Dairy and Animal Science and county extension offices throughout Pennsylvania. The availability of these materials has been listed in *Teacher\*Pages*, an electronic communications network sponsored by the Pennsylvania Department of Education which is available to all primary and secondary schools in the state. Samples of these materials have also been sent to extension services, departments of education, and Agriculture-in-the-Classroom coordinators in other states.

**Community Involvement.** The club contributes to the community through several ongoing projects. Members have assisted with fundraising efforts of PAWS (the agency for the Promotion of Animal Welfare and Safety). Members have volunteered at the local SPCA chapter, helping to clean cages and exercise animals. The club presented sessions on how to deal with animal activists at fair time, at 4-H Leaders' Conferences, and other meetings. In addition, the club displays exhibits and members are on hand to answer questions at annual events such as *Animal Products Spectacular*, an informational exhibition held at the local mall; the Animal Products Educational Tailgate at the Penn State Meats Laboratory; Agricultural Progress Days; and the Student Involvement Fair.

**Farm Animal Learning Center.** For six years, club members and advisors have worked, with assistance from Delaware Valley College students and faculty, to organize and staff the Farm Animal Learning Center (FALC) at the Pennsylvania Farm Show. This event has included displays of live farm animals and table displays of clubs and other animal-related organizations in the state. In 1994, the theme

of the FALC was "Comparative Digestive Systems of Farm Animals." In 1995, the theme of the event was "Animals Are Everywhere" and emphasized products and by-products from animals. In 1996 the theme was "Myths and Facts about Animals" explaining the most common misconceptions of farm animals and the real truth. The theme in 1997 was "Common Animal Production Practices." The event typically features a pony, a ewe with week-old lambs, feeder pigs, dairy goats, a brooder with chicks, dairy and beef calves, and miniature donkeys.

While the FALC is not intended to be a "petting zoo," touching is an important part of the learning process for many children and adults. Therefore, visitors are encouraged to touch animals. Each animal is given adequate room to move away from eager visitors if it so desires. Students are responsible for routine care of the animals during this week-long event. Faculty and staff are also available to address questions and comments from the public. As many as 200,000 people visit the Farm Animal Learning Center each year.

Posters containing information about each type of animal are displayed behind the animal pens. In 1995, the information on these posters was the basis for a survey for youth and adults. Completing the youth survey involved reading the posters and displays to find the answers to questions. The adult surveys focused on impressions and suggestions regarding the FALC; both surveys provided information for improvement of the center in future years. In 1996, the FALC also presented posters on production of field crops in Pennsylvania.

*Funding.* Students for the Responsible Use of Animals has been fortunate to receive funding for two years from the Agriculture and Rural Youth Organization Grant Program administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. These funds have provided the means to tour facilities, plan events, assemble displays, and distribute information. In addition, the club has enjoyed the outstanding support of the FALC from the Farm Show Bureau, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, and several state commodity/trade organizations. Club members also pay nominal dues, and conduct fund raisers each semester.

### Challenges for the Future

Penn State's Student for the Responsible Use of Animals has found a niche within the university community and state. Each year, the club gains greater exposure through news releases, publications, and presentations at local, state and national agricultural events. Making fellow students aware of farm animal issues and increasing membership are ongoing efforts of the club. Educating others is a rewarding experience, and a desire to do this has often been the key to

attracting dedicated members.

It is clear that the issues of animal welfare, care, and use will not disappear. It is SRUA's goal to bring the issues to the forefront where they can be clearly seen, discussed, and, if necessary, rectified. It is our hope that by doing so, proactive efforts will become the norm rather than the exception, and those becoming further removed from animal agriculture will be enabled to gain greater understanding and appreciation for the importance of animal agriculture in our world.

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