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HUMAN CONTACT AND ANIMAL WELFARE

Human-animal relationships are viewed in various ways, but from an ethological perspective they can be conceptualized in terms of inter-individual relationships. In this presentation, I will review the influence of human contact on the welfare of domestic (farm and companion) animals and zoo animals. The model used will be the relationship between humans and farm animals, the subject of the majority of ethological and psychological studies on human-animal relationships.

There are three main lines of evidence concerning the implications for the welfare of domestic (farm and companion) animals and zoo animals: handling studies in field settings; field observations on human-animal interactions; and intervention studies in field settings. Although handling at an early age may be highly influential, subsequent handling is also influential and has the potential to modify early learning effects. Conditioning and habituation to humans, occurring both early and later in life, are probably the most influential factors affecting the behavioral and physiological responses of these animals to humans.

While there has been less research conducted on zoo animals, there is a developing scientific literature on the effects of humans, particularly zoo visitors, on zoo animals. Furthermore, there is an increasing interest in understanding the influence of the human-animal relationship on companion animal welfare, but there is little empirical evidence.

This presentation will highlight the important role and responsibility of the human in the development of the human-animal relationship. The results of handling studies on domestic and zoo animals, field observations on human-domestic and -zoo animal interactions and intervention studies in the livestock industries on the relationship between human attitudes, human behavior, animal behavior and stress physiology provide evidence of causal relationships between these human and animal variables. Furthermore, this research provides a strong case for introducing stockperson training courses in the livestock industries that target stockperson attitudes and behavior. This research also demonstrates the need for more research on the influence of animal care takers in other settings, such as in domestic and zoo settings, to understand better the importance of the human-animal relationship.

The research on farm animals highlights the important role and responsibility of the human in the development of human-animal relationships, and thus underlines the need to understand not only these relationships in all animal use settings but also the opportunities to improve them in order to safeguard animal welfare.