

Perception of sheep farmers on sheep welfare and sentience: preliminary results

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Studies on animal sentience contribute to a growing interest in ethical issues and animal welfare. We aimed to study the perception of sheep farmers regarding sheep welfare and sentience. Thus, 148 sheep farmers from different municipalities in Paraná participated in a telephone interview. The questionnaire contained 26 questions on sheep farming, welfare and sentience. The results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Most of the respondents were male farmers (85.5%) (125/148). Regarding animal welfare, 73.0% (108/148) have heard of the subject, but superficially. When asked about the aspects that contribute to sheep welfare, 48.0% (71/148) considered nutrition, i.e., freedom of hunger and thirst. Most of the farmers claimed that their animals have good welfare (93.2%) (138/148); however, they believed that sheep welfare could be improved on their farms (71.6%) (106/148). When asked about which aspects could be improved, 30.4% (45/148) cited the provision of a better environment, as shelter and comfortable resting areas. In relation to sheep sentience, 52.7% (78/148) agreed and 36.49 (54/148) strongly agreed that sheep are able to clearly distinguish livestock keepers and other people; 54.7% (81/148) agreed and 33.8 (50/148) strongly agreed that sheep feel emotions; 51.3% (76/148) agreed and 29.7% (44/148) strongly agreed that sheep clearly express their feelings. In general, it is possible to observe that the interviewed farmers presented high perception of sheep sentience. On the suffering generated by some practices performed in sheep farming, 39.2% (58/148) and 27.7% (41/148) responded that sheep suffer a little and moderately, respectively, from identification through ear notching or tagging, tattooing or micro-chipping. Regarding castration, 32.4% (48/148) and 31.1% (46/148) cited that sheep present severe to maximum suffering, respectively. In relation to the perception on tail docking, 31.8% (47/148) and 23.0% (34/148), respectively, answered that sheep show moderate and maximum suffering when such practice is performed. Fifty percent (74/148) of farmers responded that sheep do not suffer when sheared. On breeding techniques, different levels of suffering were noted: 23.6% (35/148), 23.6% (35/148) and 21.6% (32/148) responded that sheep show no, moderate and low suffering. When questioned about weaning, 31.8% (47/148) cited that sheep suffer moderately. Farmers showed different levels of perception on sheep suffering from current farming practices. The recognition of sentience and suffering is essential to modify practices that generate low welfare, and to apply legislation to promote sheep welfare. Our results indicate that farmer recognition of suffering due to specific practices needs improvement and may be considered a primary prevention indicator.

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