

Ethics of field experiments

Animal behaviourists, in general, and those of the ethological persuasion in particular, carry out many field studies on the behaviour of animals in their natural environments. Field experiments include those in which animals, living in their usual surroundings, are subjected to manipulations such as the introduction of dummies (models), the supplementation or reduction of their food supply, the playing-back of recorded animal sounds, their capture, alteration of appearance and release and the application of telemetric recording equipment. Such studies have an important part to play in our understanding of behavioural ecology. These techniques, of course, interfere with the animals to varying degrees and there may, at times, be ethical problems involved in their use. Is suffering being caused? Is there likely to be loss of life? Is it possible that the environment may be damaged? A paper which looks critically at the techniques used in field research and assesses some of the ethical issues has recently been published in the journal *Animal Behaviour*. The point is made that it may be possible to accept some level of distress in animal experimentation if the purpose is the alleviation of human suffering, but it may not be acceptable if the goal is the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity alone.

The author calls upon field workers to take an interest in these matters, to set up guidelines and to impose upon themselves stricter controls. It is greatly to the credit of both author and journal that this well presented, interesting and important paper was written and published.

Cuthill I 1991 Field experiments in animal behaviour: methods and ethics. *Animal Behaviour* 42: 1007-1014

Laying hens in colony systems

A report on the welfare of laying hens in colony systems has been presented by the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) to the Agriculture Ministers of Great Britain. It makes some 61 recommendations for the improvement of the welfare of laying birds in deep litter houses, perchery (barn) houses, multi-tier colony houses and in free-range systems. The main part of the report deals with housed birds; the coverage of hens in free-range systems is somewhat limited.

The report calls for the immediate adoption of a minimum space allowance of 1425 sq cm per hen and for the institution of legislation to ban, by 1996, all routine non-therapeutic beak-trimming. It recommends research into the conditions which minimize aggression and maintain social stability within groups and into the relationship between groups, ie space allocation, light levels and the incidence of cannibalism. It suggests that hens on free-range should be encouraged to move freely in and out of their houses by providing sufficient popholes and by ensuring that the outside areas have adequate ground vegetation and some overhead cover.

There is little doubt that the overall adoption of the 61 recommendations will improve the welfare of colony kept hens. There was, however, dissent in the FAWC over some of the recommendations. The main report includes a two page summary of the dissenting views held by five out of the 23 members of the Council. They (the dissenters) apparently wanted to give the birds the benefits of the doubt *re* interpretation of the scientific and technical evidence. They recommended more substantial changes in husbandry practices - phased generally in over a longer period of time compared with the rest of the Council's suggestion of a series of short term moderate alterations.

The main differences between the views of the majority of the Council and the dissenters can be summarized as follows:

	Majority of Council	Dissenters
<i>Minimum space allowance per bird (cm²)</i>	1425	2500
<i>Minimum perch length per bird (cm)</i>	18 (some to be raised above floor)	25 (all overhead)
<i>Litter substrate minimum part of floor (%)</i>	33-50 (depends on system)	66
<i>Group size</i>	not mentioned	to be kept as small as possible
<i>Beak trimming to be banned within (years)</i>	5	2

Both groups want to improve the conditions for hens in colony systems - they differ on by how much and how quickly. They seem, however, to have been in full agreement over the rest of the recommendations.

A spirited account of the differences of opinion within FAWC has been given by Ruth Harrison - one of the main dissenters - in her article 'The myth of the barn' published in the New Scientist Vol 132 No 1797 p40-43 (30 Nov 1991).

The main report can be obtained from MAFF Publications, London SE99 7TP. Price £2.95. A full copy of a document detailing the minority view is available (free) from the FAWC Secretariat, Room 2107A, Tolworth Tower, Surbiton, Surrey KT6 7DX.