

Why European consumers do not buy more animal welfare friendly foods?

Eurobarometer surveys conducted in 2005 and 2006 indicated that farm animal welfare is highly great relevant to European citizens and that it influences their choice of where to shop for food: in the 2006 survey 62% of the 29,000 people questioned said they would probably be willing to change their usual place of shopping in order to buy more animal welfare friendly food products. However, such products still only represent a small segment of the food market. This might reflect a lack of information about production systems and of market transparency. Indeed, 54% of the participants in the 2006 Eurobarometer survey said that current food labels didn't help when shopping, and 53% couldn't easily find suitable information. At the same time most thought that farm animal welfare in Europe had improved over the last decade.

Welfare Quality carried out in-depth focus group research in 7 European countries^[1] on consumers' perceptions and expectations about the animal welfare friendliness of the products they normally buy, their interpretation of animal welfare and the type of information they would like in order to make more informed choices. The results will be published in November 2007 in the fifth report of the Welfare Quality® series: 'Consumers' Views about Farm Animal Welfare: European Comparative Report Based on Focus Group Research.



Our research revealed substantial differences across EU countries in consumers' attitudes towards shopping for animal friendly products but there are also some common elements. In all 7 study countries the focus group participants' knowledge about farm animal welfare tended to be shaped by a bipolar understanding of farming systems (in which 'industrial' systems and alternatives, such as 'organic' were perceived to provide low and good animal welfare respectively. Additionally, more was known about welfare issues that they related to food quality and safety (e.g., use of antibiotics, animal feeds, stress) than those thought to have little influence on the final food product. Participants also lacked detailed technical knowledge about modern farming systems, modern animal breeds, and the animals' biology. Despite this, they had very high expectations about the animal friendliness of a range of 'quality' products that were currently available.

The participants were also concerned but not necessarily worried about farm animal welfare, the majority, especially in West European countries, believed that it had improved in the last few years and that European regulation was sufficiently stringent to guarantee a decent life for farm animals. Most participants were interested in learning more about how food is produced and about the animals' living conditions but they did not necessarily want to be presented with information about different production systems whilst shopping for food and many considered animal welfare as a 'public good' issue than one to be addressed by the market. A significant proportion also associated organic, high-quality and even locally-produced products with higher levels of animal welfare.

In relation to shopping practices, only a few participants was willing to actively search for animal-friendly products; most said that when shopping they look for product attributes such as taste, quality, price,

convenience and freshness. They also assume that existing legislation and regulation in the food chain, (state direct regulation or supply chain actor governance through food standards and assurance schemes), ensure that what is available on the market is produced to an acceptable ethical standard. Given that the most widely voiced ethical concern is animal suffering or cruelty towards animals, the most common expectation is that market products are obtained through farming methods that avoid animal suffering, and that quality or luxury products reflect much higher animal welfare standards.

Some 'critical consumers' actively search for animal-friendly products. This minority group has grown in the last 10/15 years especially in the UK and the Netherlands. These consumers seem willing to pay more for welfare-friendly products, but their view of higher animal welfare involves more natural systems of production (e.g. free range, organic and 'traditional' farms) that enable the animals to experience a range of positive emotions. In contrast, they believe that the absence of pain or other negative emotions like fear and stress are not worth rewarding with premium prices, but rather represent the bare minimum quality of life that should be guaranteed to all food animals.

Our findings identify the need to address public concern about farm animal welfare through a range of mechanisms. For example, improving the transparency of the market via the harmonisation of product information and improved communication would help consumers to make more informed choices about animal friendly products. Welfare Quality is working to achieve these objectives. Of course, many EU citizens also expect other forms of public intervention, (such as financial support for farmers, higher minimum standards, banning problematic production systems), aimed at improving the quality of life of for farm animals in Europe.

The results are presented in the Comparative Focus Group Report (Evans, A. and Miele, M.). This will be published in 2007 as Welfare Quality Report Series, No 5. This report can be purchased from the Welfare Quality® project by sending an e-mail to Ruth Leo, Cardiff University, leor@Cardiff.ac.uk.

[1] Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Hungary, UK, France and Norway.

For more details

Please contact the authors

Mara Miele (mielem@cardiff.ac.uk) or

Adrian Evans (evansa18@Cardiff.ac.uk).

Adrian Evans and Mara Miele