

THE WRITINGS OF MARC BEKOFF

Marc Bekoff, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and co-founder with Jane Goodall of Ethologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. He has won many awards for his scientific research including the Exemplar Award from the Animal Behavior Society and a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 2005 Marc was presented with The Bank One Faculty Community Service Award for the work he has done with children, senior citizens, and prisoners and in 2009 he was presented with the St. Francis of Assisi Award by the New Zealand SPCA. Marc has published more than 1000 essays (popular, scientific, and book chapters), 31 books, and has edited three encyclopedias.



As Food Animals Became “Things,” Their Feelings Were Ignored

A new book explores how farm animals became objectified money-making products.

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- Since the Industrial Revolution, farm animals came to be treated as bulk commodities, or a form of capital.
- Consumer demand was a large contributor to the expansion of the animal product sector in addition to railways, steamships, and refrigeration.
- The term “animal welfare” became more popular in the 1960s, but it means different things to different people.

The field of animal law is rapidly growing globally because of the numerous issues that arise about the fair and just treatment of nonhuman animals (animals) who are used and abused in a wide variety of contexts. So-called “food animals,” also called “farm animals,” are among the countless sentient and emotional beings—often treated as unfeeling “things”—who find themselves being used and abused by the millions every year to feed humans who choose to eat them. For example, The Ontario (Canada) Federation of Agriculture claims animals *don’t think or feel* despite clear scientific evidence they do.

This is why legal scholar Dr. Sophie Riley’s new book, *The Commodification of Farm Animals* caught my eye and the reason I agreed to write the foreword for, and interview her about, her landmark work. Here’s what she had to say.

Marc Bekoff: Why did you write *The Commodification of Farm Animals*?

SR: The book grew out of research I had done some time ago on early treaties and international instruments (19th and first three decades of the 20th century) dealing with border controls and quarantine in the trade of farm animals. I was curious why there was no mention of animal welfare and why animal well-being

seemed to be treated as a trade issue. To my mind, this reduced animals to little more than commodities and I set out to research whether this was a pattern replicated in other parts of the production chain during those times; and if so, what role was left for ethical considerations.

MB: How does your book relate to your background and general areas of interest?

SR: Amongst other things, I teach environmental law and animal law. These two areas of interest come together in my research on how regulators manage unwanted animals—those animals variously termed “invasive aliens,” “pests,” “feral,” “non-native.” At its core, this research analyses the claims of non-humans and nature to their place in the world and evaluates how to balance the ecological necessity of protecting ecosystems and species against ethical and socio-cultural considerations that question the indiscriminate killing of unwanted animals. As such, the research delineates contours of the human-animal relationship, a matter that applies equally to domesticated animals as to animals in the wild.

MB: Who is your intended audience?

SR: The book is intended for anyone interested in animals—policy-makers, regulators, farmers, animal producers, consumers, students, historians, and animal activists.

MB: What are some of the topics you weave into your essay and what are some of your major messages?

SR: The book breaks new ground because of its historical focus, and the application to the farm animal sector of Norbert Elias’ theories on the civilising process. However, three of the most important

themes that weave throughout the book are: arguments which challenge the idea that intensive animal production is a 20th-century phenomenon, dependent on advances in technology occurring after 1945; the introduction of a concept I have called “the commodification pathway”; and, a critique of deficiencies in the evolution of the animal welfare paradigm.

If we cast our minds back to the Industrial Revolution, events such as the development of railways, steamships, and refrigeration had already been instrumental in allowing the animal product sector to expand and intensify long before 1945. The real issue is what drove and sustained these developments. The book argues that the answers lie in increased consumer demand and the vagaries of the marketplace, pointing to the origins of intensive animal production as predominantly a commercial issue, rather than exclusively a technological one.

This finding is central to the notion of a commodification pathway, which, quoting from the book, is defined as “a utility-driven means of animal management, which objectifies animals as goods in the marketplace, prioritises human uses and lacks meaningful engagement with ethical principles.” The following chapters each deal with a steppingstone in this pathway, examining the growth of markets, the evolution of anti-cruelty regulation, how animal disease came to be treated as a trade issue, and the arrogation of the veterinary profession to commercial and trade objectives. The book argues that farm animals came to be treated as bulk commodities, with few limits on their use, “leading to animal exploitation and regard for them as a form of capital.”

This observation links to the critique of how animal welfare operates in practice. Chapter 6 asks the question—Whither Ethics? It traces the development of what came to be known as animal welfare, arguing that it derived from anti-cruelty regulation of the 19th century and that the term “animal welfare” only came into common usage from the 1960s. Then as now, animal welfare and anti-cruelty mean different things to different people. Think for example, what happens to cattle, poultry, and pigs in production systems, and whether we would regard animal welfare for our companion animals along the same lines?

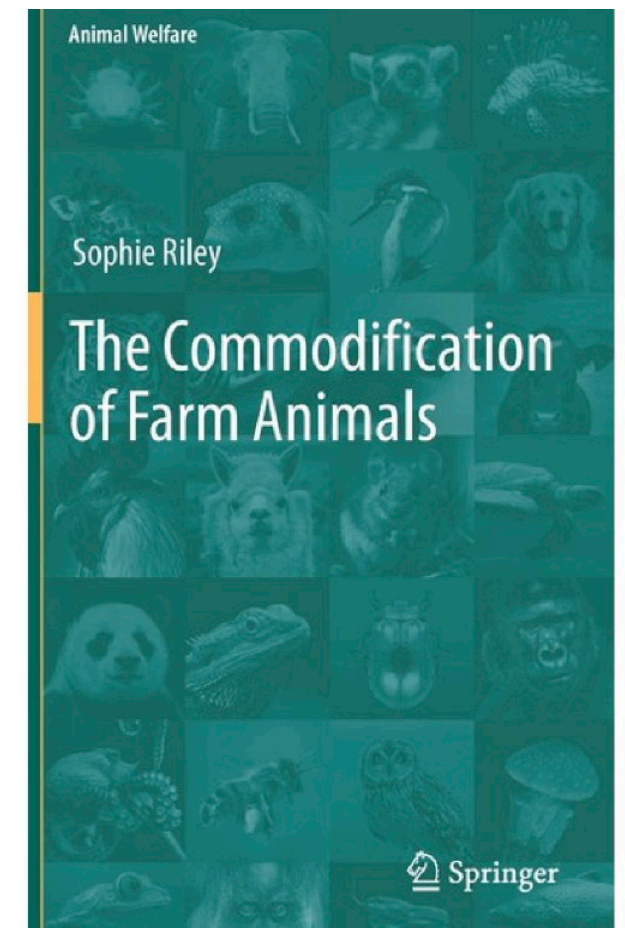
MB: How does your book differ from others that are concerned with some of the same general topics?

SR: There are many books which discuss animal welfare and animal production systems, and a great number of these were useful for the research I undertook. This book differs from those studies because it has a strong historical focus that breaks new ground in its research of international instruments dealing with quarantine, trade, animal diseases, and how these developments converged to cement animal commodification.

MB: What are some of your current projects?

SR: This is an exciting time to be working in the animal law space, as so much is happening. One area that is fast gaining attention is

the development of an international treaty on animal wellbeing. A special issue of the *Global Journal of Animal Law*, titled “International Law and Animal Health and Protection: Persistent Themes, New Prospects for Change,” explores these developments. I am one of the guest editors and co-writing an article.



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