

Stockpersons' attitudes towards animal welfare within the livestock export industry

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Australian livestock exported by sea are managed and cared for by industry stockpersons, both domestically and internationally. These workers typically originate from countries with diverse religious and cultural beliefs, where the mandated animal welfare practices may be of a lower standard than is expected in Australia. Stockmanship is widely accepted to be among the most important factors influencing the welfare of farm animals (Hemsworth and Coleman, 2011), as stockperson attitudes are reflected in their behaviour, which in turn impacts the well-being of the animals in their care (Waiblinger *et al.* 2002; Kauppinen *et al.* 2012). Understanding the attitudes of livestock export workers and seeking their feedback on their workplace can help to highlight areas within industry that can be improved. The attitudes of the Australian public towards animal welfare in the livestock export industry has been explored (Sinclair *et al.* 2000) and the attitudes of some stakeholders in the Asia Pacific region have also been reported (Sinclair *et al.* 2017). However, the opinion and views of those working within the industry have not previously been studied. Understanding stockpersons' attitudes and perception of welfare is, therefore, crucial to accurately gauge the care and level of welfare Australian animals are provided throughout the live export supply chain.

We formulated a questionnaire to obtain information on demographics, attitudes and personal beliefs toward animals and livestock welfare, as well as the respondents' opinions on their current working environment and the livestock welfare within it. Data were collected between August 2018 and April 2019; respondents were invited to complete the survey online or in hard copy while care was taken to preserve their anonymity. Surveys were distributed through three export companies, on ten livestock vessels, in four Australian pre-export feedlot facilities, two foreign feedlots and at various industry events. Responses were collected from 265 workers; the majority were male (86.8%) and predominantly from Australia, South-East Asia and the Middle East which included producers, feedlot staff, ship workers, veterinarians and exporters.

Results show that respondents displayed empathy, respect and concern for the welfare of the animals in their care. The majority of people working in the Australian livestock export industry showed an understanding of animal welfare principles and demonstrate a commitment to improving welfare. These findings challenge the assumptions held by some animal welfare groups and some members of the Australian public that livestock are being managed by people with little concern for their welfare (Sinclair *et al.* 2000; Buddle *et al.* 2018). Our results describe how demographics of individual respondents were shown to influence their attitudes towards animal welfare, but overwhelmingly, respondents had a favourable view of livestock welfare in their workplace and believed that their colleagues work hard to achieve this. Most respondents (95%) agreed/strongly agreed that working with livestock was enjoyable. Our results share similar findings to those from Sinclair *et al.* (2017) who conducted an Asia Pacific stakeholder study where the key values such as 'seeing moral value' in implementing animal welfare change were shared amongst all stakeholders, but show some contrast in attitudes when compared between various roles of stakeholders.

When poor animal welfare outcomes are reported in the livestock export industry, there is a tendency to blame industry workers (Buddle *et al.* 2018). Our findings suggest that stockpersons are mindful of welfare and have a desire to optimise welfare in their workplaces. Apportioning blame towards industry workers and their attitudes to the animals may be misguided and detract the focus from systemic industry issues underlying poor welfare outcomes. The findings of our survey challenge current public perceptions about the industry and describe suggestions for how the industry can improve animal welfare and workplace satisfaction.

References

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