Research & Reviews: Journal of Veterinary Sciences eISSN:2581-3897

Livestock Raising and Selective Breeding

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Opinion

Received: 30-Sep-2022, Manuscript No. JVS-22-64534; **Editor assigned:** 03- Oct-2022, Pre QC No. JVS-22-64534(PQ); **Reviewed:** 17- Oct-2022, QC No. JVS-22-64534; **Revised:** 24- Oct-2022, Manuscript No. JVS-22-64534(R); **Published:** 31- Oct-2022, DOI: 10.4172/2581-3897.6.S7.003

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DESCRIPTION

Animal husbandry is the branch of agriculture concerned with animals that are raised for meat, fibre, milk, or other products. It includes day-to-day care, selective breeding, and the raising of livestock. Husbandry has a long history, starting with the Neolithic Revolution when animals were first domesticated, from around 13,000 BC onwards, predating farming of the first crops. By the time of early civilisations such as ancient Egypt, cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs were being raised on farms.

Major changes took place in the Columbian exchange, when Old World livestock were brought to the New World, and then in the British Agricultural Revolution of the 18th century, when livestock breeds like the Dishley Longhorn cattle and Lincoln Longwool sheep were rapidly improved by agriculturalists, such as Robert Bakewell, to yield more meat, milk, and wool. A wide range of other species, such as horse, water buffalo, llama, rabbit, and guinea pig, are used as livestock in some parts of the world. Insect farming, as well as aquaculture of fish, molluscs, and crustaceans, is widespread. Modern animal husbandry relies on production systems adapted to the type of land available. Subsistence farming is being superseded by intensive animal farming in the more developed parts of the world, where, for example, beef cattle are kept in high density feedlots, and thousands of chickens may be raised in broiler houses or batteries. On poorer soil, such as in uplands, animals are often kept more extensively and may be allowed to roam widely, foraging for themselves.

Most livestock are herbivores, except for pigs and chickens which are omnivores. Ruminants like cattle and sheep are adapted to feed on grass; they can forage outdoors or may be fed entirely or in part on rations richer in energy and protein, such as pelleted cereals. Pigs and poultry cannot digest the cellulose in forage and require other high-protein foods.

Feeding

Animals used as livestock are predominantly herbivorous, the main exceptions being the pig and the chicken which are omnivorous. The herbivores can be divided into "concentrate selectors" which selectively feed on seeds, fruits and highly nutritious young foliage, "grazers" which mainly feed on grass, and "intermediate feeders" which choose their diet from the whole range of available plant material.

Breeding

The breeding of farm animals seldom occurs spontaneously but is managed by farmers with a view to encouraging traits seen as desirable. These include hardiness, fertility, docility, mothering abilities, fast growth rates, low feed consumption per unit of growth, better body proportions, higher yields, and better fibre qualities. Undesirable traits such as health defects and aggressiveness are selected against.

Selective breeding has been responsible for large increases in productivity. For example, in 2007, a typical broiler chicken at eight weeks old was 4.8 times as heavy as a bird of similar age in 1957 while in the thirty years to 2007, the average milk yield of a dairy cow in the United States nearly doubled.

Animal health

Good husbandry, proper feeding, and hygiene are the main contributors to animal health on the farm, bringing economic benefits through maximised production. When, despite these precautions, animals still become sick, they are treated with veterinary medicines, by the farmer and the veterinarian. In the European Union, when farmers treat their own animals, they are required to follow the guidelines for treatment and to record the treatments given. Animals are susceptible to a number of diseases and conditions that may affect their health. Some, like classical swine fever and scrapie are specific to one type of stock, while others, like foot-and-mouth disease affect all cloven-hoofed animals. Animals living under intensive conditions are prone to internal and external parasites; increasing numbers of sea lice are affecting farmed salmon in Scotland. Reducing the parasite burdens of livestock results in increased productivity and profitability.