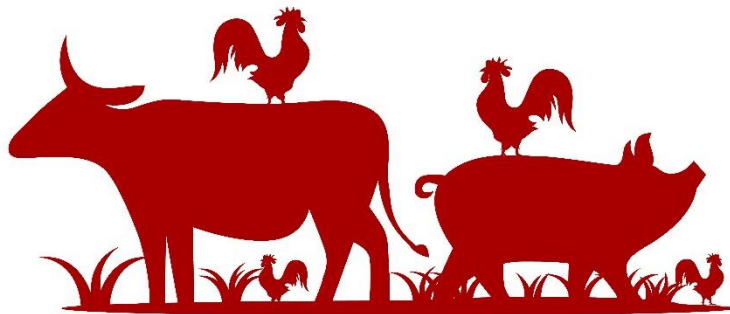


Towards a society based on animal dignity



Jinke Hesterman

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(Deze Engelstalige versie van Naar een dierwaardige samenleving is vertaald m.b.v. Google translate)

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Foreword - 3

1. The big absentee: the animals themselves - 4

2. Animals have a lot to say - 6

3. The gap between the ideas of livestock farmers and scientific insights seems to be widening by the day - 8

4. Practice is stubborn - 10

5. "Wishful thinking" - 12

6. Sticking to old principles - 14

7. Innovations within the existing system - 16

8. Animal dignity is a relatively new concept - 18

9. Animal-worthy livestock farming law - 20

10. Meanwhile in Europe - 22

11. "But that's a niche!" - 23

12. Animals at the table - 25

13. Towards an animal-worthy society - 27

14. Coherence with protein transition – 30

15. And then something about manure - 33

16. Finally - 34



Foreword

For a while I have been trying to find out what we mean by animal dignity in the Netherlands. As the word becomes more established, it turns out that not everyone means the same thing by it. Nevertheless, the word has an important function in the debate we are having about livestock farming. Parties with very different interests and views seem to find each other in a concept that is supposed to provide a common basis in the search for a direction in which livestock farming can develop further.

In this publication I explore the meaning of the concept of animal dignity, where it comes from, how it suddenly became dominant in the Netherlands and what we can do with it. Is the concept here to stay? Yes and no. Not in combination with livestock farming as we know it today. But yes, as a concept, on the basis of which we can investigate new relationships between humans and animals.

Jinke Hesterman

Blogger on animal welfare, former editor-in-chief of the Levende Have foundation



1. The big absentee: the animals themselves

We talk about animal dignity. But they mainly talk about how we can improve animal welfare. In this way, the far-reaching idea of animal dignity has been reduced in a short time to a concept that we are familiar with and that can be incorporated into existing livestock farming. And if the resistance becomes too great, then someone always starts talking about the need for an integrated approach, about revenue models, pilots, dilemmas, a level playing field. Then further research is needed and the debate stagnates.

Animal dignity is going down the drain, just like sustainability. The real meaning is fading into the background. Marten van den Berg, director general of agriculture at the Ministry of LNVN, recently spoke of "a beautiful trajectory" ¹. He did not mean the realisation of animal dignity as such, but the covenant on animal-worthy livestock farming, which has been revived by the new minister Femke Wiersma after a period of stagnation. The covenant must lead to improved welfare supported by the livestock industry and the government and laid down in legislation. The well-known interest groups are at the table. The animals themselves are conspicuously absent.

For the time being, it seems, there are no major changes in the offing. Dutch livestock farming is already animal-worthy ², not only do the poultry farmers think so when they look at their almost one hundred million chickens. The Minister of Agriculture Femke Wiersma also thinks so. It is not without reason that she and her party BBB included in the coalition agreement of the Schoof cabinet that they want to take "concrete steps" towards "even more animal-worthy livestock farming". In other words: current livestock farming is already animal-worthy, but it can always be better.

Are we talking about the same thing?, I wonder. Is the explanation of animal dignity by the poultry farmers and Femke Wiersma also my explanation of animal dignity? Or have I strayed into the radical regions of the debate? When I listen to Bas Rodenburg (professor of animal welfare and animal behaviour at the University of Utrecht), certainly not an activist, I think that is not so bad.

Rodenburg was at the cradle of the six leading principles of animal-worthy livestock farming, as published in an advisory report by the RDA in 2021. ³He mentions *the calf with the cow* as an example of animal-worthy livestock farming. He talks about connecting with the behavioural needs, the nature of the beast. Different designs for livestock farming are needed. The entire system must be set in motion.

¹Vaarkamplering, 10 October 2024

² <https://www.pluimveeweb.nl/artikel/1049859-nvp-ziet-af-van-deelname-covenant-dierwaighdee-veehouderij/>

³<https://www.rda.nl/publicaties/zienswijzen/2021/11/18/zienswijze-dierwaidgende-veehouderij>

Rodenburg expresses himself cautiously. When I think of animal dignity, I envision a different type of livestock farming than the current poultry, pig and cow sheds. I think of a form of coexistence in which the species-specific behavior of animals, their possibilities, their skills and their autonomy are leading. That starts with the recognition of new insights that have been provided by science in recent decades and on which there is now a necessary consensus.

These new insights will lead to greater animal welfare . But will they ultimately result in livestock farming based on animal dignity? All things considered, animal-worthy livestock farming within the current food system is an impossibility, a contradiction in terminis. Livestock farming is still almost entirely built on the instrumental value of the animal and has grown into a very efficiently operating and lucrative chain. If that structure remains intact, livestock farming based on animal dignity will not get much further than a few extras. This is also called "welfare washing".



2. Animals have a lot to say

Thirty years ago I thought: if animals could talk, they could show us the way to a different kind of livestock farming, away from the bio-industry. In 2011 we made the video *Kippenpraatjes* for Levende Have together with poultry researcher Monique Bestman ⁴.

Dr. Erich Bäumer was the first to record chicken chatter and provide an explanation for the various sounds. The Leidsch Dagblad reported about this in 1964, following the publication of "Das dumme Huhn, Verhalten des Haushuhns". Bäumer, a scientist affiliated with the Max Planck Institute, also discovered the 'gakel', a typical sound for a hen that is not happy, the newspaper reported sixty years ago.

Chicken chatter is difficult to describe. You have to hear it, preferably in combination with the associated behavior. Hence the video. Levende Have filmed hens that have laid an egg, a broody hen with chicks, a rooster that points out the food to his hens, a rooster that marks his territory and keeps a competitor at a distance, a hen that gets scared and runs away, hens that take a dust bath.

I gradually discovered that animals have a lot to say. With current resources, their signals can be registered and interpreted much better than Bäumer's tape recorder. Although not everything can be observed yet. This is evident from the ongoing research by Marjolein de Rooij of the Vakbond voor Dieren ⁵. Together with others including dr. Monique Bestman she is investigating how you can determine whether chickens are feeling happy. She does this on the basis of the sounds that chickens produce and the behaviour that they display. In fact, a continuation of the Bäumer research from the previous century, but then mainly focused on discovering expressions of pleasure and happiness. De Rooij wants to know whether these expressions also occur in chickens that are kept in large groups.

The chicken sounds have so far been recorded using so-called sonograms (visual representation of sound). The interaction between chickens has also been filmed. Based on the initial research results, three types of communication are distinguished:

- sounds that chickens make when they come into contact with their own kind,
- sounds that serve to point out or warn other members of the same species, and
- body language.

Furthermore, De Rooij has observed another type of communication, which has no meaning for their own kind, but which does fit a certain activity. For example, during dust bathing. Then chickens can make a purring sound, an expression of pleasure or happiness, comparable to the soft, singing sounds when in contact with their own kind. In this respect, chickens are just like people: they sing in groups and "under the shower".

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vEQ9GwcF3Y>

⁵ <https://www.vakbondvoordieren.nl/kippengeluk-verkennend-onderzoek-gepresenteerd/>

The sounds of chickens that live in small groups are clearly audible, it turns out. In a larger group, these sounds cannot be distinguished with the equipment used (Sennheiser ME66 shotgun microphone). There is simply too much noise. "It therefore seems that the analysis of the sounds of individual chickens cannot be used to measure happiness based on sounds of happiness and pleasure in a large barn", says De Rooij. She is considering using a different microphone or AI. Additional (technical) research is needed to determine whether it is possible to filter soft sounds of happiness and pleasure from the sound of a full barn.

Thousands of acoustic recordings of pigs

During the Vaarkamp lecture of October 10, 2024, Rodenburg spoke about a study into the versatility of the emotional life of pigs. This was mapped out after an analysis of pig sounds using artificial intelligence. Using thousands of acoustic recordings collected during the lives of pigs, from birth to death, an international team of researchers was the first in the world to map all the sounds of pigs that occur under a large number of circumstances and in various stages of life.

The more than 7,000 audio recordings served as the basis for an algorithm that can determine whether an individual pig experiences a positive or a negative emotion or something in between. With a further analysis of the sound files, the researchers found a new pattern that revealed in even more detail what the pigs experienced in certain situations. In total, they managed to identify 19 different emotional expressions. "There are clear differences in pig sounds when we look at positive and negative situations. (...) By training an algorithm to recognize these sounds, we can classify 92% of the sounds into the correct emotion," explains Danish animal behavior expert Elodie Briefer ⁶.

*If Pigs Could Talk is a recently released documentary dedicated to this research.
https://www.dr.dk/drtv/program/hvis-grise-kunne-tale_470370.
Unfortunately, so far only available to Danish viewers.*

Significance of research into emotion, cognition and communication

The emotion research is one of many international studies into the world of experience of animals, including their cognitive and communication skills. Animals are able to express their presence, their needs, their emotions and also their interests. They are able to learn and therefore they must have the opportunity to develop. There is increasing evidence that a very wide range of animals – all vertebrates and many invertebrates – have a form of consciousness. This should be sufficient to recognize that humans and animals are morally equal. Progressive insight has far-reaching consequences for our relationship with them.

⁶ https://news.ku.dk/all_news/2022/03/pig-grunts-reveal-their-emotions/en
<https://uniavisen.dk/har-du-talt-med-din-gris-i-dag/>



3.The gap between farmers' ideas and scientific insights seems to be widening by the day

While representatives of the livestock industry, such as the Dutch poultry farmers' association, like to present themselves as warm advocates of animal welfare, the gap between them and science is growing. The more we learn about what animals can do, feel, and think, the more difficult it will be to reconcile existing practices with it. This brings with it a lot of uncertainty.

The livestock industry is becoming more and more defensive by the day. There is no appealing perspective for conventional farmers and there will not be one for the time being. They are simply on the path of more of the same and it is difficult to get rid of it. This makes people susceptible to disinformation, fear and enemy images. "Everything must be destroyed", is the fear. So far, the reactions have been fairly innocent, such as the call by Ursula Lolkema ⁷, BBB member of parliament from Friesland, to regard tractor sounds and manure smells as cultural heritage. But the sentiment underlying this could easily turn into a new series of violent farmer protests.

On the other side of the spectrum we find the philosopher Matthew Wray Perry, affiliated with the University of British Columbia. He wrote in response to the [New York Declaration](#) (2024): "If it is likely that such a large number of animals have conscious experiences, then this means that we need to rethink the practices that involve or influence animals. (...) We all need to adapt and change our own lifestyles in accordance with the concern for the sentience of animals." ⁸

Where Wray Perry mainly refers to new insights, Martha Nussbaum, professor of philosophy of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, goes even further. She wants us to let our conscience and our sense of justice speak. According to her, humanity has a great debt to repay to animals for what has been done to them and is still being done to them. "The extent to which we ourselves are involved in practices that harm animals should make anyone with a conscience think about what we can all do to change this situation. Imposing feelings of guilt is less important than accepting the fact that humanity as a whole has a collective duty to face and solve these problems."

According to Nussbaum, the way we should treat animals has everything to do with justice. She advocates legally enforceable animal rights. Nussbaum proposes using 'ethograms' - a catalogue of behaviors and needs of an organism based on observation. Based on these needs and capabilities, an animal's basic rights can be formulated ⁹. According to her, this explicitly involves more than just respect for animals as sentient beings. Animals are also beings for

⁷ <https://www.omroepfryslan.nl/nl/nieuws/16935059/geuren-en-geluiden-friese-platteland-worden-zintuiglijk-erfgoed-het-hoort-bij-onze-cultuur>

⁸ <https://justice-everywhere.org/general/why-is-the-new-york-declaration-on-animal-consciousness-morally-important/#more-6306>

⁹ Martha C. Nussbaum, Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility, 2023, Querido

whom relationships are important, who want to reproduce, who want to move and play ¹⁰.

In an article on animal dignity, Finnish legal scholar Visa Kurki, affiliated with the University of Helsinki, examines the difference with animal welfare. He notes a similar mixing of concepts that is taking place in the Netherlands. The term animal dignity is used to indicate that there is an increased level of animal welfare, according to Kurki. According to him, however, there is an essential difference: animal welfare is based on the humane treatment of animals and the prevention of unnecessary suffering, whatever that may be. Animal dignity, on the other hand, is based on respect for animals: they are not an instrument for humans, animals should have the same rights and opportunities as we do.¹¹

It is not only philosophers and lawyers who emphasize that many animals are subjects rather than objects just as much as humans. Research by biologists, ethologists, zoologists, ecologists has yielded a wealth of information in recent decades about numerous animal species and the capacities of individuals belonging to these species. These are also fantastic times for non-scientists who take note of this: a whole new world opens up for them.

New insights and a gnawing conscience about our dealings with animals are accompanied by a major shift in our human thinking. In connection with the changes that are occurring in the relationship between man and nature, one can even speak of a tilting worldview. Just like five or six centuries ago, when the image that the earth was the center of the solar system had to make way for heliocentrism. Thus, 150 years after the publication of Darwin's classics, we must definitively abandon the anthropocentric point of view.

Not only because science has set our thinking in motion, but also because our use of natural resources is causing serious damage to ecosystems. Stopping intensive livestock farming, feeding gigantic numbers of animals for meat production, freeing up land for a protein transition, is crucial for a healthy and sustainable food system. The British zoologist George Monbiot has written an interesting book about this: *Regenesi*s ¹².

¹⁰Martha C. Nussbaum in *Animal Dignity*, edited by Melanie Challenger, Bloomsbury, 2023

¹¹What is Animal Dignity in Law? <https://leoh.ch/article/view/5801>

¹²*Regenesi*s, George Monbiot, Starfish Books, 2023



4. Practice is stubborn

The change advocated from many sides is leading to the development of alternatives, but practice is stubborn. Many are convinced that Dutch livestock farming is facing a transition. Few know exactly what that will look like. Who will experience that transition and who will not?

For the time being, the largest sector – the dairy industry – is heading for stabilization, i.e. maintaining current production. According to EY, the industry has a turnover of 27.3 billion euros. The dairy industry has invested 1.6 billion euros in factories in the Netherlands in the past five years. ¹³These are interests that can count on strong defense not only in their own country, but also at European level.

Changing the production method in dairy farming and the production volume does not seem to be on the agenda for the time being. Animal dignity is not part of the dairy industry's vocabulary. Animal welfare is. That is part of a "sustainable dairy chain", together with "climate-conscious dairy production, preservation of biodiversity, improvement of animal health and grazing."

According to the advocates of intensive livestock farming, there is sufficient room for small improvements within the current and still very lucrative system. That should be enough for the time being, is still the prevailing view. The animal welfare concept is sufficient for them. They keep the consumer on a string with quality marks. Supermarkets ensure with their pricing policy that sufficient profit can also be made from products without a quality mark.

Certainly, I am generalizing. There are now plenty of livestock farmers who want to do things differently and who also do things differently. They often produce for the local market, switch to agro-ecological farming methods, with and without animals. But in the meantime, the increase in scale continues. We are talking about bulk production for export, which involves large numbers of animals. The number of stables with a Better Life Quality Mark has increased considerably, but the adjustments associated with this do not lead to a system change. At most, they make the lives of animals a little easier.

In a number of cases, quality marks even stimulate the increase in scale, such as in the broiler sector. The 1-star Better Life chicks are seen by many as a successful transition based on market forces. ¹⁴In fact, the mega-stables in this sector are increasing. It works like this: the farmer wants to expand because he is allowed to keep fewer chicks per square metre and must build a covered run according to the quality mark. The farmer applies for a permit for expansion and the same number of animals that he had or even more. There has been a lot of lobbying with local and provincial authorities to make an exception for quality mark companies. The Steering Group Scale Up Kip 1 Star, with representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, the

¹³Analysis of economic contribution of the dairy processing industry to the Dutch economy, EY 2024
https://www.nzo.nl/media/uploads/Dutch-Dairy-Industry-Final-Report-29082024_site.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.pluimveeweb.nl/artikelen/1137681-nooit-gedacht-dat-1-ster-beter-leven-de-standard-zou-worden/>

Animal Protection and the business community, offered a helping hand. In this way, companies were able to realise their expansion despite the nitrogen crisis.¹⁵

Illustrative is the appreciation that veterinary organization KNMvD recently expressed by awarding a prize - the Geert Reinders Penning - to pig veterinarian Marrina Schuttert.¹⁶ When presenting this award, she not only asked for attention to animal dignity, but also to farmer dignity. By this she meant the investments that pig farmers have to make, for example in free-range farrowing pens. Sows are given a little more space and freedom of movement in these pens.

On the website of Nieuwe Oogst, Schuttert said: "Livestock farming based on animal dignity is often mentioned in the same breath as animal-oriented design. I often miss the substantiation of whether a pig is really better off in this way. We want to make animal welfare measurable and express it in centimeters and square meters. I am actually pragmatic; it all has to be implemented and people have to be motivated and be motivated for it. I also cannot escape the impression that emotion plays a major role in all discussions about animal dignity."¹⁷

It is not only the investments in a little more animal welfare, but also in meeting environmental requirements, that will keep the transition of livestock farming at bay for years. The existing number of animals kept must at least be maintained in order to earn back these investments. It is also a waste of money to hang the stable full of expensive sensors that measure ammonia emissions¹⁸ and then decide that the way in which the animals are kept really has to change for the sake of animal welfare.

Professor One Health Dick Heederik, coordinator of future-proof agriculture Proeftuin Regio Foodvalley, puts it this way: "Everything in livestock farming is closely connected. If you change something somewhere in the system, something can go wrong on the other side. Making livestock farming more sustainable is a complicated and lengthy process." Yet, according to him, doing nothing is not an option: "That will only make it more difficult in the future. In 10 years' time, the problem will be much more complex and intractable than it is now."¹⁹

¹⁵<https://dierenwelzijn.blog/megastal-met-beter-leven-keurmerk/>

¹⁶Sailing Camp Lecture 2024

¹⁷<https://www.nieuweoogst.nl/nieuws/2024/10/15/varkensdierenarts-marrina-schielt-geerd-om-inzet>

¹⁸<https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2024/10/10/snuffelen-aan-de-stal-a4868757>

¹⁹<https://tastinggarden.regiofoodvalley.nl/regio-deal-foodvalley/duurzaam-en-gezond-producten>



5. "Whishfull thinking"

The agricultural magazine Pigbusiness issues a "major warning" in November 2024. The author of the article quotes former secretary of the Poultry Farmers' Union Aalt den Herder: "The starting point should be: earn more with higher animal welfare. Then the livestock farmer can take a step. Anyone who looks at the negotiations on the livestock farming covenant sees the opposite happening. The wishful thinking of society (NGOs and some politicians) is leading."

The loss of income for pig farmers will be enormous, the author read in a report by Wageningen University and agricultural consultancy Connecting Afro & Food ²⁰ about the consequences of additional measures that should lead to a substantially higher level of animal welfare. Horrifying news. Pig farmers will have to deal with a minus of 51%. And the number of sows will decrease by 75%. Animal welfare from a perspective of wishful thinking means: "That will seriously weaken our livestock farming", according to Pigbusiness.

While Dutch pig farmers are cooperating with their representatives in a covenant on animal-friendly livestock farming, the production of piglets is being further increased. The export of piglets to Spain has more than doubled in four years and will probably pass the two million mark this year. That is more than a thousand trucks that are on the road for an average of 23 hours. A so-called long-distance transport that is increasingly encountering resistance in society. But the pig sector is not bothered by it. Only a minimum of 0.7% of Dutch pig farms qualify for the highest animal welfare standard of the Animal Protection, the Better Life Quality Mark with 3 stars (including organic).

Farrowing crates

By investing in small but expensive adjustments, pig farmers are keeping drastic changes at bay. Take the farrowing crates. In the standard situation, sows are clamped between bars. In this position, they also have to suckle their piglets. Through legal proceedings, Pigs in Need has now succeeded in getting the Dutch Minister of Agriculture to acknowledge that sows are suffering.

A 'free-range farrowing crate' is already mandatory in Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. In Austria, the target is 2033. In Germany, 2035. In 2021, it was still expected that the Netherlands would have this legally arranged by 2024, but the pig industry put a stop to that.

Now, in the Netherlands too, the realisation that things need to change is slowly dawning. The Dutch Society for the Protection of Animals has been promoting the so-called free-range farrowing crates for some time through the Better Life Quality Mark. With Better Life 2, free-range is now part of the regulations from five days after farrowing. With 3 stars, three days of

²⁰ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documents/reports/2024/10/14/bijlage-werken-aan-dierenwelzijn-in-de-veehouderij>

confinement is the maximum. In 2035, the sow in a farrowing pen must have a surface area of 4.5 m², with a turning circle of at least 2 meters. The entire farrowing pen must be 7.5 m².

It's called a "free-range farrowing crate" - the sow can stand up, take a few steps and turn around - but it doesn't have much to do with freedom of movement. Let alone that the sow can show some more natural behavior, other than suckling her piglets. At the Eurotier trade fair in November 2024, the industry played into the future demand for "free-range farrowing crates".

²¹Their use would cause a 10% increase in costs for a company with 900 sows. ²²

With such investments, the pig farming industry is locked in for at least two decades when it comes to animal welfare. In economics, people sometimes talk about a *lock-in*, a condition in which previous investments in a certain direction continue to reinforce further development in that direction. Seen in this light, it is not so strange that all kinds of new animal welfare measures, and certainly something like animal dignity, are called wishful thinking. It also shows that the so-called step-by-step approach does not lead to animal dignity. Small steps, some of which could have been taken years ago, perpetuate the existing system for a long period of time.

²¹ <https://www.pigbusiness.nl/artikelen/1150994-leenders-roosters-presenteert-nieuw-vrijloopkraamhok-op-eurotier/>

²² https://agrivaknet.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/15_Agrivaknet.pdf

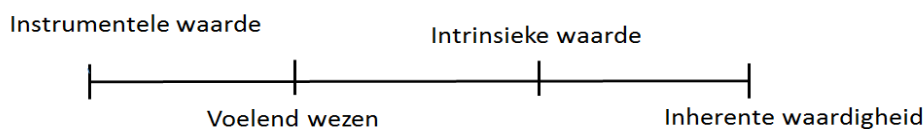


6. Sticking to old assumptions

Anyone who calls animal dignity a wishful thinking is in fact holding on to old principles and reasoning from there what would be needed to provide the unimaginable numbers of animals within the existing intensive livestock farming with a slightly better life, in order to be able to continue to provide a very lucrative sector with a " *license to produce*". Anyone who declassifies animal dignity in this way ignores that, under the influence of new insights, a development has taken place in the thinking about animals over the past hundred years, as summarized above in the "abandonment of the anthropocentric position".

This development entails a different view of the moral value of non-human animals. And ultimately also a different justification for keeping animals. Now that the translation of this into practice is getting closer, those who live under the assumption that changes within the current livestock farming system must take effect are digging in their heels. That is indeed unfeasible and unaffordable. It is therefore understandable that people expect a "clear-cutting".²³

To clarify, let's go back to 2012. That year, the Dutch ethicist Franck Meijboom introduced a scheme of views on the moral value of animals in his essay on *Keeping Animals* :



The diagram shows a continuum, which means that there is a transition from left to right.

- On the far left, the animal has only an **instrumental value** (they are useful to humans).
- The view of the animal as **a sentient being** revolves around the capacity to experience pain and pleasure and the importance of attention to well-being in our dealings with animals. We have direct obligations towards sentient beings to prevent suffering and to improve well-being.
- In the vision of **intrinsic value** (included in the Dutch Animal Act in 2013), there are morally relevant similarities between humans and animals, which make a moral appeal to us. This is about respect for the individual animal. In addition to welfare, concepts such as animal integrity and the value of life also play a role.
- Inherent **dignity** stands for the view that animals have cognitive capacities, which make them subjects of their own lives. On this basis, they have an inherent dignity just like humans and humans and animals are morally equal . It is also in this context that animal rights are discussed: the rights that are necessary to protect the inherent dignity of the individual.

²³ <https://www.nieuweoogst.nl/nieuws/2024/10/25/dierwaardigheid-kan-leiden-tot-kaalslag>

In the essay, Meijboom addresses the question of the moral justification for keeping animals. He sees three forms of justification:

- (a) justification in terms of a welfare assessment, in which the welfare of humans and animals must be weighed against each other;
- (b) justification in terms of a value assessment, in which the intrinsic value of an animal is weighed against the value of the goals of the keeping; and
- (c) justification in terms of rights. Here, dignity is attributed not only to humans, but also to animals, which must be protected through rights.

" All three are legitimate approaches, but they are not interchangeable", according to Meijboom. A choice will have to be made. He also indicates that not all views justify keeping animals. For example, in the view of **inherent dignity** , keeping animals almost necessarily means an infringement of the animal's right to freedom.

We can regard Meijboom's scheme as a kind of timeline. Seen in this light, Dutch livestock farming has left the purely instrumental value of animals behind and there is recognition for the vision that animals are sentient beings. Current livestock farming is based on a hybrid form, with the task of improving animal welfare.

This is different for the vision of the intrinsic value of the animal. So far, this vision has hardly been heeded. Until recently, the Animal Welfare Act did not enforce this either. That is why pig farmers still remove the tails of piglets, dairy farmers remove calves from the cows, and poultry farming uses chickens that are so deformed that they need all their energy to lay gigantic numbers of eggs. To name but a few examples.



7. Innovations within the existing system

Now, with a call for animal dignity, poultry, pig, calf and cow farmers fear not so much a different housing system - that is still a long way off - but rather an accumulation of animal welfare requirements. Ranging from a few extra centimetres for each animal, to a cool lying area for the cow, a sunken nest for piglets, perches with the right shape for laying hens and broilers, new selection methods for cockerels, pen enrichment for pigs, a robot for vaccinating hens (six vaccines at the same time, 2800 hens per hour), a tag that tracks the movement and temperature of sows so that the insemination time can be better determined, a mite trap for blood lice and a technique (CalfGTP) that, among other things, recognises and records the feed intake per pen per individual animal. (Innovations presented at Eurotier 2024 in Hannover).

All these are extras that intensive livestock farming does not oppose, provided that they are not legally enforced and there is room for development. Better animal welfare is possible, if only they can expand their stables and keep even more livestock in one place. A development in which large agricultural companies are also getting involved. For example, a large producer of veal and beef, animal feed, dairy raw materials and calfskins, as well as a company for feeding young calves, lambs and piglets, recently bought up several modern calf farms that had registered for a termination scheme.

Close-knit front

In response to the nitrogen crisis, the rising concept of animal dignity and the rise of farmers who are taking a different approach (the so-called frontrunners), a close-knit front of traditional farmers' interest groups, livestock feed companies, melk.nl and the Dutch Dairy Organisation has formed after the farmers' protests of 2021. They are the drivers of further scaling up, see no point in shrinking the livestock population and have no idea what animal dignity *ultimately* entails. Their motto is above all: give farmers a future. ²⁴

And that is not all. Animal welfare will lead to a higher cost price of milk, meat and eggs, it is predicted. Farmers and their advocates do not expect the (Dutch) consumer to pay for that. So the people must help out fiscally. A contribution from the state treasury is inevitable because of the extensive export of agro-business. The livestock farmers consider it impossible to pass on their investments in the prices on the European or world market.

The interest groups have managed to make the business model of a livestock farm with more animal welfare an important theme. "We want to, but..." is often heard. "We want the preconditions to be in order". In response to the in their eyes objectionable commercials of social organizations, such as "Stop met sloopmelk" by Wakker Dier, they are further increasing the promotional campaigns for meat and dairy under the guise of "healthy and affordable". ²⁵ The question is, however, how long they can keep this up. Dubious advertising messages

²⁴ <https://www.geefboerentoeekomst.nl/>

²⁵ <https://www.geefboerentoeekomst.nl/wp-content/uploads/Geef-Boeren-Toekomst-Hoofdsport-Vlees-2024-uitzendkopie-9dBfs.mp3>

regularly encounter a negative assessment from the Advertising Code Committee. Eating meat appears to be less healthy than is suggested. Nutritionists advocate the consumption of less animal proteins. Reports about abuses in livestock farming and at slaughterhouses continue to follow one another.

Even an enforcement agency such as the NVWA now indicates that they want to stop mopping with the tap open. "We see it as our role as NVWA to actively contribute to enforceable and executable standards within animal-friendly livestock farming," says [Inspector General Gerard Bakker](#). He advocates a system change. Society, the consumer, is also open to other voices.

With this, the NVWA is joining the State of the Animal, a public survey by the RDA ²⁶. This survey has now been conducted twice. Although the differences are still small, a development can be observed between 2018 and 2022: the view that humans and animals are equal shows an upward trend (from 24% to 26%); the animal is seen more as a partner. The number of Dutch people who believe that humans are above animals is decreasing: from 40% to 36%. 52% agree with the statement "All animals have their own value, regardless of their usefulness to humans", slightly more than in 2018.

A shift is also occurring in the views on animals in livestock farming: in 2018, one in three Dutch people believed that animal welfare cannot be guaranteed in the current form of livestock farming (30%). In 2022, this will be almost four in ten (39%). As in 2018, a majority believes that mega-stables can never pay sufficient attention to the welfare of production animals (60% in 2018 and 59% in 2022).

But it is not only public opinion that is subject to change. The relationships between government, science and business – once called the "Golden Triangle" – are also under discussion. "With the shrinking of the agricultural sector and the criticism of agriculture due to the pressure on nature and the environment, the discourse of the Golden Triangle came under increasing criticism. The cooperation model was treated unfavourably with terms such as the Green Front", Wageningen University noted ten years ago in the report "Golden Triangle? Discourse analysis of top sector policy".²⁷

²⁶ <https://www.rda.nl/staat-van-het-dier/nieuws/2023/04/06/dierenwelzijn-gaat-nederlanders-aan-het-hart>

²⁷ <https://edepot.wur.nl/328119>



8. Animal dignity is a relatively new concept

Wageningen University's role is still a dual one. Two currents are emerging within the university: one that has traditionally served the agro-industry and contributed to greater animal welfare, and one that thinks about a system change. The university now offers "the knowledge and expertise needed to realise animal-friendly livestock farming", according to the WUR website.²⁸

"When it comes to animal welfare, the focus has long been on preventing discomfort, such as preventing tail biting in pigs or feather pecking in chickens and preventing disease, stress and pain. Animal-friendly livestock farming is about the quality of life from the animal's perspective and offering a life that is worth living. People could call that 'happy!'"

Animal health and welfare researcher Fleur Hoorweg states that animal-friendly livestock farming focuses on the animal. "It is about a quality of life as experienced by the animal itself. It is about a life that is worth living. It is about a living environment that makes it possible to perform species-specific behaviour and to achieve a positive mental state."²⁹

In the Mansholt Lecture 2024, scientists from Wageningen University distinguish five dilemmas when it comes to future land use for agriculture, forestry and nature in the EU. One of these dilemmas is the farm animals: 1,450 million chickens, 134 million pigs, 75 million cows, 59 million sheep and 11 million goats. 75 to 80% of the available agricultural land is needed to feed all these animals. Apart from the space requirement and the ecological effects of all that livestock, the scientists also indicate that the way of keeping them is difficult to reconcile with the idea of animal dignity.³⁰

The concept of animal dignity, by the way, did not originate from Wageningen University. Its origins are difficult to determine. Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been attention in international circles of philosophers to the question of whether the principle of *inherent* dignity that applies to people and underlies all human rights should not also apply to animals. The Dutch Franck Meijboom discussed this in his essay from 2012, described on page 11.

*Animal Dignity*³¹ was published in 2023, a collection by the British Melanie Challenger with numerous articles by various authors from all over the world (ecologists, biologists, philosophers, sociologists, lawyers). As a literary scholar and poet, Challenger is extremely interested in the communication between human and non-human animal species. But she also wants to know whether we have a common moral basis. Whether dignity means the same thing in human and non-human animal species. According to the well-known Frans de Waal († 2024),

²⁸ <https://www.wur.nl/nl/onderzoek-resultaten/dossiers/dossier/dierwaardige-veehouderij-1.htm>

²⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JKROYLXjGc

³⁰ Key dilemmas on future land use for agriculture, forestry and nature in the EU, <https://edepot.wur.nl/676755>

³¹ <https://www.bol.com/nl/nl/p/animal-dignity/9300000139354562/>

we do not have to discuss this for long: the concept of dignity also applies to animals. In her collection, after reading all the articles, Challenger goes one step further: since the human species is considered an animal, human dignity is a form of animal dignity: "All dignity is animal dignity".

The view on animal dignity, as elaborated by the Council for Animal Affairs (RDA) in six leading principles, does not go as far as "inherent dignity" in Meijboom's scheme. Animal dignity has much more in common with the concept of intrinsic value, is rather an elaboration of it and names the concrete moral obligations that follow from it. In the view of the RDA (see next chapter), animal dignity is something different from inherent dignity. In its view, the RDA does not talk about animal rights and does not exclude the keeping of animals.

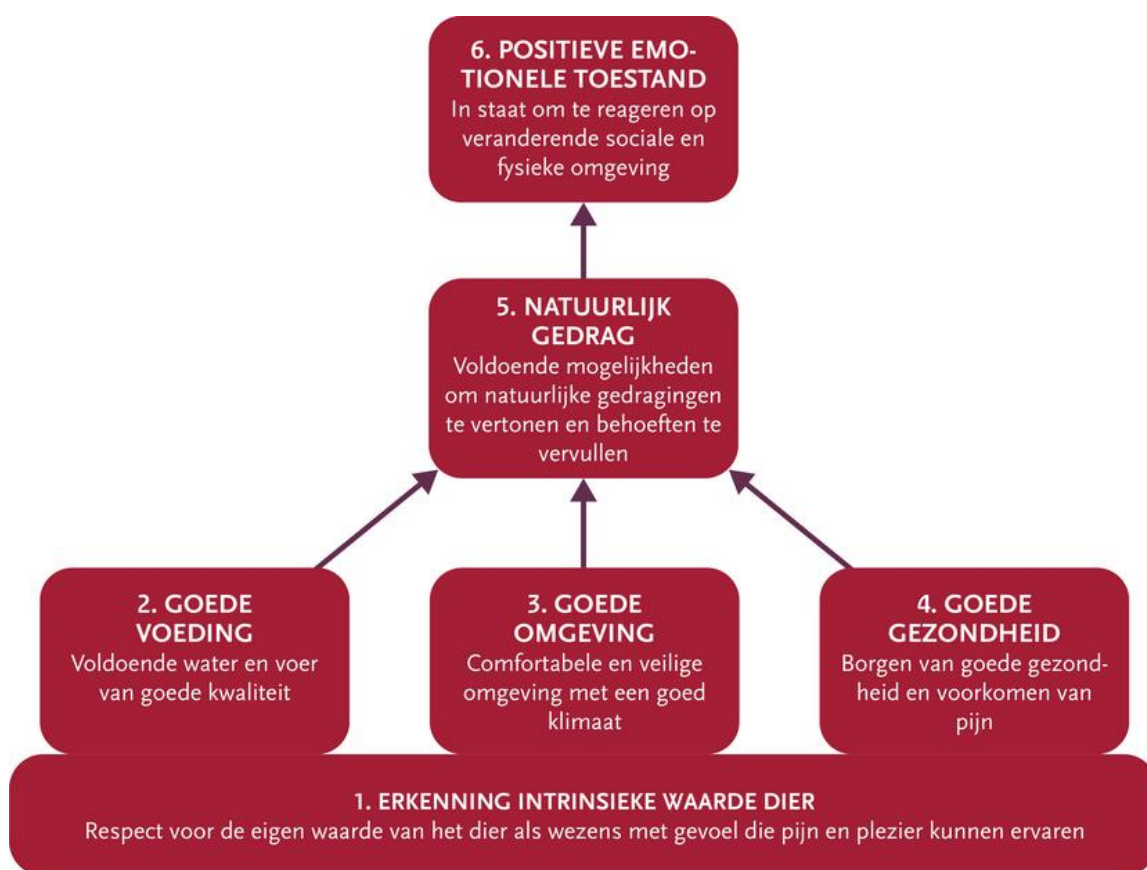
Incidentally, the question is whether keeping animals is impossible from the perspective of inherent dignity. That assumption flattens further thought formation. After all, there are many possible forms of society between human and non-human animals, just as between humans, non-human animals and other organisms, with service based on reciprocity. But for human animals it does mean saying goodbye to the instrumental value of non-human animals and therefore to killing animals other than by way of euthanasia.



9. Article of the law on animal-friendly livestock farming

Due to the efforts of the Council for Animal Affairs, we are currently talking about a special interpretation of animal dignity in the Netherlands. The RDA's 2021 view³² introduces six guiding principles that generally clarify what we should understand by animal dignity.

Strictly speaking, it is a kind of animal welfare++. In fact, five of the six principles were already enshrined in the [Animal Welfare Act](#) at the time of presentation. Although not yet sufficiently specified, the recognition of the intrinsic value was laid down in Article 1.3. The points from the diagram below 2,3,4 and 5 were also included in the law, even though they were formulated differently: animals had to be free from thirst, hunger and incorrect nutrition, free from physical and thermal discomfort, free from pain, injury and disease, free from fear and chronic stress and free to display natural behaviour.



Politically, the RDA's view came at just the right time in 2021. At that time, there was great confusion about an amendment by the Party for the Animals ([the Vestering amendment](#)) that had been adopted by the House of Representatives and the Senate. A party like the VVD in particular did everything it could to dismiss the amendment as a form of insanity. VVD

³² <https://www.rda.nl/publicaties/zienswijzen/2021/11/18/zienswijzen-dierwaarde-veehouderij>

spokesperson Thom van Campen spoke of a monstrosity. Officials from the then Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality were very helpful in [eliminating the amendment](#).

In 2023/2024, thanks to an [amendment by the VVD and D66](#), an article was added to the Animal Act with 2040 as the year in which "livestock farming based on animal dignity" must be achieved. It can be deduced from this that, as of 2025, the current livestock farming still has fifteen years to go before it can call itself "based on animal dignity" after a number of adjustments. I wrote about this major [postponement operation on my blog](#).

I deliberately put "livestock farming based on animal dignity" in quotation marks. Animal dignity, as argued earlier, is confused with prevailing views on animal welfare. With improvements in existing stables, which ensure that animals suffer less pain, suffer less stress, experience fewer health problems. Chickens, pigs, cows, calves get a better life than, say, twenty years ago. But does the predicate "animal dignity" apply?

The advantage of the amendment by VVD and D66 is that the Dutch parliament will have a say in further specifying animal welfare standards. If all goes well, there will be a package of measures supported by the livestock industry. Animals will be given more space for their behavioral needs and physical interventions to adjust animals, will be a thing of the past.

Escape

The article of law does, however, contain an escape. Section 4 of Article 2.3a states: "The rules to be established pursuant to the first and third paragraphs are aimed at achieving an animal-worthy way of keeping animals by 2040 at the latest, *unless and to the extent necessary* for certain situations a longer term is set by the general administrative measure referred to in the first paragraph with a view to a reasonable transitional period aimed at enabling animal keepers to recoup the investments necessary to comply with those rules."

The Netherlands is one of the few countries with animal dignity in the law, but very different from Switzerland, for example, where animal rights were already enshrined in the Constitution in 1992. Although there are doubts about its usefulness³³, it has initiated changes. In Switzerland, a maximum has been set for the number of animals in veal farming (300 calves), pig farming (1,500 meat pigs) and poultry farming (27,000 chickens).

The Dutch article of law is not something to be proud of. It leaves room for haggling. The way in which animal dignity has now ended up in law, and how it is being implemented, tempers expectations. Space has been created for a step-by-step approach: an animal welfare approach to be precise, and not an approach that results in inherent dignity, in animal rights.

Yet the whole fuss about the Animal Act is a sign that a transition is in the air. In the most livestock-dense place in the world with staggering numbers of animals among millions of people, changes are underway. But for the time being, intensive livestock farming will most likely still be able to make a few leaps in scale.

³³Slaying the Swiss Unicorn of Animal Dignity <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/14/3/507>



10. Meanwhile in Europe

The developments in the Netherlands cannot be viewed separately from what is happening at European level. With almost every proposal to adjust Dutch legislation – also in the area of animal welfare – representatives of the livestock farming sector ask for attention for a level playing field. They do not want, as they say, "national heads". A critical view is still necessary.

Livestock farmers will not quickly start talking about it themselves, but Europe has regulations that prohibit the abuse of animals, while in practice this is still very much ongoing. Think of the ban on removing pigs' tails. Something that now seems to be coming to an end in the Netherlands after much pleading by animal welfare organisations and political parties.³⁴

In Europe, a review of animal welfare legislation is underway. For a while, it seemed as if the European Commission, under the influence of farmer protests, had put all efforts on the back burner. But nothing could be further from the truth. A "strategic dialogue" has been held, resulting in a report.³⁵ It states: by 2035/2040, agricultural and food systems in Europe will develop within planetary boundaries. There must be sufficient access to a diverse range of safe, affordable, sustainable and nutritious food for a healthy diet, produced to high animal welfare standards.

These high standards are derived from Mellor's five-domain model³⁶, which also underpins the RDA's vision for animal-friendly farming. Mellor's model states that farm animals:

- (1) are healthy;
- (2) have sufficient space and resources to thrive;
- (3) are able to display normal behaviour;
- (4) enjoy nutritious food and clean water at all times;
- (5) have positive mental experiences, with environments that stimulate curiosity and positive interactions.

Any revision of European legislation should be based on scientific evidence from both literature and practice-based research, in addition to the scientific advice of EFSA³⁷. The socio-economic impact on farmers should be taken into account. Resources, tools and appropriate timelines are needed to allow the market to adapt to potential changes that may lead to an increase in costs. So no standstill in Europe. Although it may take some time before the five domains and the advancing scientific insight are translated into new regulations.

³⁴<https://dierenwelzijn.blog/europa-pa-en-de-varkensstaarten/>

³⁵ https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/171329ff-0f50-4fa5-946f-aea11032172e_en?filename=strategic-dialogue-report-2024_en.pdf

³⁶<https://dierenwelzijn.blog/dierenwelzijn/>

³⁷<https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/topics/topic/animal-welfare>



11. "But that's a niche!"

What do the guiding principles for "livestock farming based on animal dignity" mean in practice? That was the question with which we split into two groups at a regional meeting of the RDA at the end of October 2024. In "my" group I wanted to discuss *Kalverliefde*, in my opinion a good example of practical animal dignity. At the dairy farms that participate in this brand, the calf is allowed to stay with the cow. "But that's a niche!", the discussion leader cut me off. I took it as if I had brought up something unimportant and kept quiet about it.

At home I looked up the concept: the word "niche" appears to come from biology and refers to the whole of environmental factors that are important for maintaining a plant or animal species. In business administration, "niche" means a small specialized market for a specific group of products or services. Or a small market segment that still offers potential for exploitation.

So there is nothing wrong with a niche. On the contrary. The more niches the better. They offer space for diversity. The greater the diversity of initiatives, the greater the chance that a number of them will gain a foothold. *Kalverliefde* is such a niche with exploitation potential. The brand is in a small market segment, although the milk and yoghurt of this organic dairy line has conquered the shelves of Jumbo, AH and Plus in a short time. Not yet in the entire country, but in many places³⁸. Seven dairy farmers are participating so far. With them, the heifer calves are allowed to stay with their mothers for a period of 2.5 to 3 months after their birth and the bull calves for at least 35 days.

Other dairy farmers will not simply be able to follow the example of the *Kalverliefde* farmers. It requires quite a few adjustments to the stables and the business operations. The exploitation potential is therefore mainly in politics and society, with the consumer. *Kalverliefde* may be a niche, the brand stands for important expectations, essential values, and a good dose of emotion. The brand could easily become *mainstream*, as soon as the consumer starts to find it normal that the calves can stay with the mother cow and that is the deciding factor when purchasing. But most farmers will not want to or be able to anticipate that too early.

Nevertheless, *Kalverliefde* comes somewhat close to what we could call "livestock farming based on animal dignity", in my opinion. Even though "livestock farming based on animal dignity" remains a difficult concept, a contradiction in terms. *Kalverliefde* is also a good example of that. Allowing the calves to stay with their mother has everything to do with their dignity, but it does happen in the context of livestock farming: the bull calves that are allowed to grow up with the mother cow for 35 days are eventually fattened up and killed. No matter how you look at it – that has little to do with animal dignity.

The farmers of *Kalverliefde* are thinking about alternatives. "In the future, we would very much like all calves to stay on the farm their entire lives. That is not so difficult for the heifer calves,

³⁸<https://kalver-liefde.nl/sales-points>

because they will later become dairy cows. For the bull calves we are working very hard on a solution and we hope to be able to announce it to you very soon".

The solution that emerges from this will mainly depend on numbers. The more bull calves, the more difficult it is to find a destination for them other than slaughter. The slogan "He who drinks milk, must eat meat" remains fully applicable and also in this case places the responsibility on the consumer.



12. Animals at the table

Before animal dignity ends up on a dead end via a covenant and legislation within the existing livestock farming: it is good to realize that there is a way out. To do this, we need to let go of our thoughts about existing livestock farming systems. And that we invite animals to come and sit at the table. Figuratively speaking. But in such a way that they are present and have a say in the decisions that people make.

There are many ways to let the animals we keep speak. For example, animals, with the help of people who can listen to them well, are capable of a lot. Read the previously quoted Frans de Waal. They do not necessarily need rights for that. Of course, their legal position must be reflected in the law, in such a way that the interests of non-human beings are safeguarded and they are no longer dependent on the weighing of interests that people make. After all, in this weighing of interests, the weakest party almost always loses out. In other words: if there is to be a fair weighing of interests, human and animal interests must be considered equal.

Psychiatry

I am reminded of a booklet that I received from my supervisor in 1973 at the end of my internship in child psychiatry: *Trees Speak*, by psychiatrist JRM Maas, at the time medical director of the Pompe Clinic in Nijmegen, an institution for forensic psychiatry. In the early 1970s, a few years after the Pompe Clinic opened, a storm arose in psychiatry. Existing power relations between patient and therapist were called into question, as were classic treatment methods such as electroshock, isolation cells and injections. The system in which patients were deprived of their freedom, in which they had no say, proved to be no longer tenable. Anti-psychiatry gained a foothold.

These were confusing times. In *Trees Speaking*, Maas attempted to connect by making himself vulnerable and giving his vision of power and powerlessness, help and helplessness, equality and inequality, certainty and uncertainty. The title of the book refers to a quote from "End of the Family" by David Graham Cooper, a South African-born psychiatrist and well-known name in the anti-psychiatry movement, who called into question current views on institutions.

"Heidi, four years old, said, after I had taught her the language of trees, how to shake hands with them in the right way, and how she could then listen to their different answers from tree to tree, how she could hear the tree say 'hello' and how she could overcome the withdrawal of other trees: 'I think you are crazy!'"

Not everything that anti-psychiatry brought about lasted. We can look back with some amazement at how patients and their caregivers treated each other on an equal footing. The roles were sometimes reversed to the extreme. Since then, we have had patient rights and patient councils, to name but a few achievements from that time.

The Pompe Clinic is now a secure institution due to the presence of convicted and non-convicted TBS patients. The website states: "The starting point of our treatment is that we work

on recovery together with our patients and their network. We take into account the strengths and limitations of our patients. In doing so, we pay attention to the independence of the patient and we are alert to risks."

Empathy

Yet it was an instructive period. We can look back on anti-psychiatry as a powerful emancipation movement, just like the second feminist wave (1960s, 1970s and 1980s). A similar movement is evident in the work of scientist and activist Lori Gruen (philosopher and ethicist, affiliated with Wesleyan University in Connecticut). She believes that we do not have to measure the answer to the question of whether there is such a thing as animal dignity by what animals can and cannot do, what characteristics they have. According to her, we can better work on improving our relationships with animals "by responding empathically to their needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes and unique perspectives".³⁹

Several scientists from the US, Australia, Canada, the UK, Chile and Zambia have joined forces to consider ways to represent non-human animals in decision-making. "This representation is crucial and is based on working with animals. Recognizing the dignity of other species and the capacity of animals to act and communicate on their behalf requires their fair representation in a democracy. We seek to determine how best to do this," they write in a joint statement on their website *Animals in the room*.⁴⁰

Working on animal dignity in a credible way means giving animals more (choice) freedom, showing respect for the individual animal, and listening to what animals want themselves. This means that animals are given a say in how their lives look like. After all, the animal is central. And not how humans think they can best fill it in. Exit the polder model, in which traditional representatives of the livestock industry together with the Animal Protection Society try to construct an "animal-worthy livestock farming". Welcome to those who can speak on behalf of the animals.

³⁹Entangled Empathy, Latern Books, 2014 (The translation *A Web of Empathy* will be published in January 2025)

⁴⁰ <https://animalsintheroom.org/>



13. Towards a society based on animal dignity

The concept of animal dignity is a useful addition to existing concepts such as animal welfare, intrinsic value of the animal and inherent dignity. Provided that it is no longer used in combination with current forms of livestock farming. It will have to be given an independent meaning, as an expression of the emancipation of animals, such as chickens, cows, pigs and horses. Instead of talking about “livestock farming based on animal dignity”, we can therefore better speak of a society based on animal dignity.

If people and animals want to live together, if they agree that they want to settle somewhere in an equal relationship with each other where that is also possible, if they receive permission from the government, how do they proceed? What is their programme of requirements? That obviously depends on the size of the available space, on the food supply on site. On the number of human and non-human animals that want to live and work there. And on what each individual finds important.

It takes a fair amount of imagination to get an idea of what that looks like. By looking at and listening to animals, we can get a long way. The question is not whether animals can create a social bond with humans, but – to quote the late Frans de Waal – whether we are smart enough to know how smart animals are. "As a trained biologist and ethologist, I have little patience with the paralyzing scepticism of the present", he wrote in *Are we smart enough to know how smart animals are?* ⁴¹ "I doubt whether it has been worth the ocean of ink that we have spent on it, myself included".

With that he meant the traditional dualisms, between body and mind, between man and animal, and between reason and emotion. These dualisms "may sound useful, but are a major distraction from the bigger picture", according to De Waal. Despite his lack of patience with the prevailing scepticism, he answered his own question with a resounding "yes". Certainly: "We are smart enough to value other species, but to do so our thick skull has had to undergo a continuous bombardment with hundreds of facts that were initially dismissed by science."

New coalitions

Existing livestock farming systems are definitely less or even completely unsuitable for a further, practical elaboration of the concept of animal dignity. But new coalitions are emerging, such as the collaboration between Groenboerenplan-partners Biohuis, Federatie Agro-Ecologische boeren, Herenboeren, Transitie Coalitie Voedsel, Louis Bolk Instituut and Caring Farmers. ⁴² A bundling of existing forces, who want to work on a far-reaching innovation of livestock farming. At the same time, Community Supported Agriculture is taking ⁴³ off.

⁴¹https://www.google.nl/books/edition/Zijn_we_slim_genoeg_om_te_weten_hoe_slim/8XroCwAAQBAJ?hl=nl&gbpv=1&pg=PT5&printsec=frontcover

⁴² <https://www.groenboerenplan.nl/>

⁴³ <https://www.voedselenders.nl/csa-samen-verantwoordelijk-voor-het-voedsel/>

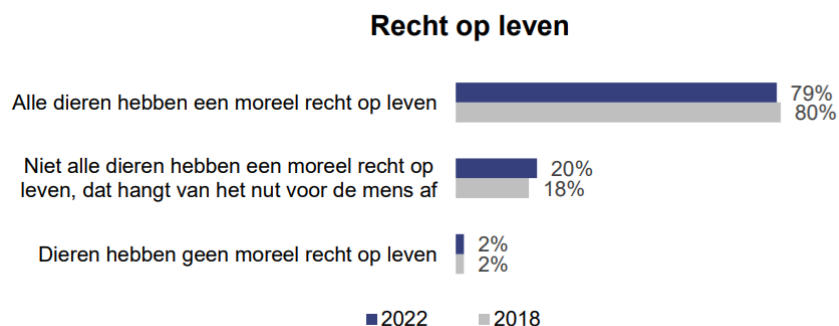
Melkbrouwerij

In this context, the community-oriented farm Melkbrouwerij ⁴⁴ in the small village of Lettele, owned by Rick and Arjuna Huis in 't Veld, is worth mentioning as an intermediate step towards a society based on animal dignity. Fifty cows of the MRIJ breed not only have access to a greenhouse stable, meadows with herb-rich grass, but also to shrubs and trees from which they can eat, a total of 50 ha. The cows are allowed to keep their horns, so that they can display their natural behaviour in the herds with the bull. And they can go outside all year round, if they want to. The milk production is 6,000 kilos per cow per year. The cows share the farm with chickens and pigs. However, the calves are still separated from the cow.

The great thing about the Melkbrouwerij is the connection with society. You can become a member. Members share in the proceeds of milk, meat, eggs, fruit and nuts. There is an agroforestry test garden. The farmer and his wife also work together with Land van Ons , a cooperative of citizens who buy land to restore biodiversity together with farmers.

Rick and Arjuna Huis in 't Veld show that animal-friendly coexistence with cows is in principle possible. The yield is indeed considerably lower than that of a conventional dairy farm, but with a livestock density of one cow per hectare, other aspects of an a society based on animal dignity and the added value of this type of livestock farming also come into view, such as the restoration of soil life and biodiversity.

One thing is whether the calves can grow up with the cows. Whether a destination can be found for all the calves. Whether facilities can be made for so-called "end-of-career cows". And whether the sale of meat can be stopped. Because that is what the cows will want, if they are given a say in the design of an animal-worthy society. After all, they have a moral right to life, as the vast majority of Dutch people also believe, as is evident from the State of the Animal. ⁴⁵



Zoöp and speakers for the living

New, completely different in design, the result of a bottom-up initiative and far removed from traditional livestock keeping, is the Council for the Living ⁴⁶, with Speakers for the Living. "First of all, the Speaker is someone with a good ear and an eye for the interests of non-human life in the operational sphere of the Zoöp. The Speaker helps to translate these interests into the actions of the organization. The Zoöp method emphasizes the need to move away from a worldview in

⁴⁴ <https://www.melkbrouwerij.nl/ons-verhaal/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.rda.nl/staat-van-het-dier/publicaties/publicaties/2023/04/06/enquete-staat-van-het-dier-2022>

⁴⁶ <https://zoop.earth/nl/page/444/raad-voor-de-levenden>

which humans are central towards a view that revolves around the interaction between all life." A Zoöp contributes to the health of ecosystems. It is an organizational model, a learning process and a basis for cooperation. The interests of the ecosystems in which the organization participates are represented in the decision-making process. Plants and animals have a say through a human spokesperson.



14. Coherence with protein transition

The transition to an animal-friendly society fits well within a protein transition. The Dutch Health Council advises to reduce the share of animal proteins in our diet from sixty percent to forty percent. Less is also possible, twenty percent for example, provided that the nutrients are maintained by adjusting the vegetable share in such a way that no shortages arise.

A protein transition is not only a matter of doing it because it can, but also because it must. There is an urgent need to produce considerably less animal proteins. Zoologist George Monbiot convincingly demonstrated this in his book *Regenesi*s . His alternative to animal proteins is called precision fermentation. In this process, micro-organisms (bacteria, fungi or yeasts) produce molecules that are indistinguishable from their animal or vegetable equivalents. You can make cookies and cakes with milk substitutes, and much more.

Representatives of the livestock industry and their lobbyists invoke geopolitical reasons to maintain food security. For them, food security mainly consists of meat, lots of meat, and animal manure to grow arable crops. But they are met with unmistakable resistance, for example from The Food Revolution ⁴⁷. This collective of consumers, farmers, scientists and activists is focused on stimulating the protein transition in the Netherlands. Important considerations are the intrinsic value of the animal, protection of nature, the environment and biodiversity, climate, our health and, not to forget, tasty food.

Denmark

The initiative is reminiscent of that of the Danish Vegetarian Society ⁴⁸, active in an agricultural country that was the first to impose a CO₂ tax on farmers. There, a coalition of farmers, scientists and proponents of organic food has been built up in a few years, which emphasises shared values — sustainability and food innovation — rather than differences of opinion and lifestyle.

"We had hard-working scientists, we had inspiring startups, we had interesting content — but always in a friendly, warm and pragmatic tone," says Rune-Christoffer Dragsdahl ⁴⁹. "And that meant that even the Danish Agriculture and Food Council was there. They came back to us a few months later and told us that they liked our approach. We don't agree with reducing livestock, they said, but they did agree that we could work together to look more at plant-based [food production] to diversify Danish agriculture."

⁴⁷ <https://thefoodrevolution.nu/>

⁴⁸ <https://vegetarisk.dk/>

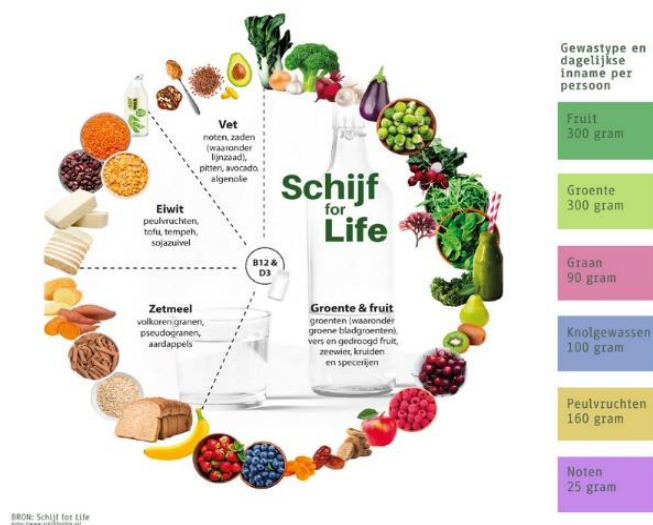
⁴⁹ <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/384515/rune-christoffer-dragsdahl-vegetarian-society-denmark-animal-welfare-future-perfect-50>

The latter proved to be a breakthrough. It brought about a shift in the field of forces. The farmers' association was indispensable in this, Dragsdahl outlines the development that was initiated. A Danish network for vegetable proteins was created, 35 projects have now been set up, as well as a fund for vegetable food.

The Netherlands-Veganland

Inspiring for the Netherlands is the research by Strootman landscape architects and Leiden University, the Netherlands-Veganland ⁵⁰(counterpart of the Netherlands Meatland ⁵¹). "There is actually no argument to come up with for not drastically reducing meat and dairy, this research makes that clear," says food philosopher emeritus professor Michiel Korthals ⁵².

All the land that is now still needed to feed animals from the livestock industry can be used so much more intelligently. How promising that is, Strootman Landscape Architects and Leiden University have thoroughly investigated. *"Central themes in the design research are*



The Wheel for Life was compiled in the context of Nederland-Veganland, a "thought exercise" by Strootman Landscape Architects and Leiden University

*climate justice and land use. It is a **thought exercise** - not a plan. The research shows that less meat and dairy yields a lot. Namely more space for nature, relaxation, climate, biodiversity, and more justice."*

By switching from livestock farming to arable farming, many farmers in the Netherlands could earn a living from a meat-free diet. In addition, the large-scale cultivation of corn, sugar beets and onions could be replaced by the cultivation of grains for human consumption, legumes, soy, nuts and seeds, vegetables and fruit, herbs and spices. Mowing manure can be used for this. The level of artificial fertilizer can be drastically reduced.

According to the researchers, a healthy, completely plant-based diet can be produced within our national borders for 20 million Dutch people. There is also room to apply wet cultivation in the

⁵⁰ <https://strootman.net/projecten/nederland-veganland/en>
<https://nederlandveganland.nl/Nederland-Vegan-NL.pdf>

⁵¹ <https://www.nederlandvleesland.nl/>

⁵² <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/waarom-hebben-we-die-veeteelt-eigenlijk>

peat areas for purposes other than food, for example. The food footprint per person goes from 1800 m² (at home and abroad) to 720 m².



"The Netherlands-Veganland has the potential to rebuild and transform the Dutch economy over a period of 20-25 years in such a way that Broad Prosperity in the Netherlands increases. "

The thought process of Strootman et al. has produced a beautiful result, also for the animals. "Because animals are no longer kept for their meat, milk and eggs, the associated animal welfare problems are a thing of the past", they simply state. One of the disadvantages is that there will no longer be any cows or sheep in the meadow. But there is a lot to compensate for this: agriculture achieves all climate goals, more space is available, water quality improves, nature gets more space, biodiversity improves, the nitrogen problem is solved, our health is promoted, and internationally we use less land, which leads to a fairer existence elsewhere.

Is it realistic? Not in the short term. Again, Nederland-Veganland is not a plan, but mainly a discussion paper. The initiators can count on strong headwind from the corner where the proponents of intensive agriculture are located, who look beyond our national borders. But the fact that Strootman et al. have taken this so seriously says a lot about the motivation to explore alternatives to the livestock industry. The researchers hope to contribute to awareness of the influence of the choices we make. They help to form an image of what the Netherlands could look like if we completely changed our current way of eating.

"Extreme ideas are sometimes helpful in gaining new insights, because they broaden our view and make us look differently at the current state of affairs and the future."



15.And then something about manure

B will there be no farm animals left in the future? Aren't animals needed for manure? It is a myth that we cannot do without the current gigantic amounts of animal manure. The level of fertilization in the Netherlands is related to a disturbed soil life, with compacted soils that do not generate plant growth themselves. The application of manure is accompanied every year by further destruction of the soil, of biodiversity. And with fraud. Something that cannot be eradicated. Those who do not live in the countryside probably find it difficult to imagine what all that manure, mainly liquid manure, does to fields and meadows and in the wide area around it. The consequences are devastating.

There are sufficient alternatives in the form of green manure, compost, wood chips, human manure, also known as "city manure". It is possible that shortages will arise during the cultivation of certain crops. The authors of Nederland-Veganland do not rule out the use of a very limited amount of artificial fertilizer. They have calculated a production loss of 30% compared to the current level. But: "With a good crop rotation plan and adding organic material to the soil, food can be produced for a long time", according to the researchers of Nederland-Veganland.



16.Finally

Many people are calculating. Is it possible: little to no animal protein, mainly plant-based food? Can we say goodbye to intensive livestock farming? Globally speaking?

If you look at China for a moment, you will quickly give up on such thoughts. There is no end in sight to the construction of mega-stables there for the time being. They are often realised with knowledge from the Netherlands about feed efficiency and the lowest possible costs per unit of product.

If you look at the rest of Asia, you will see that Friesland Campina is making big profits in Malaysia with the production of baby milk. The milk powder and other raw materials come from the Netherlands, among other places.

No, I have no illusions that the livestock farming system as we know it will be on the decline within ten years. But I do see that in places with very high livestock density, such as in Denmark and the Netherlands, the calculator is being used. In the Netherlands, on the one hand, it is used to demonstrate that a life without meat and dairy is possible and even desirable from all kinds of important considerations (environment, climate, biodiversity).

On the other hand, the livestock industry is pressing the keys to demonstrate that animals are indispensable, because of essential nutrients. They have calculated that it is virtually impossible to put together a good diet without animal proteins. Poultry meat from intensive farming in particular would be indispensable. Land and water use is low, lower than that of the production of plant-based food. Although that is still irrefutably established.

All that calculation may be good for awareness, as long as the results differ, it does little to realize that we will have to make choices. Not only for ourselves, but also for and especially together with the animals. Incidentally, the latter will, as can be expected, increasingly come into the picture as a party with interests. Their moral right to life – an undeniable fact for the vast majority of Dutch people – will inevitably coincide with the general interest at some point.

When exactly will happen, it is impossible to say. It is striking that groups and organizations that focus on the transition of agriculture mainly focus on the switch from animal to plant-based proteins. There is talk of a ratio of 60% plant-based and 40% animal. Much of this is about the future of the farmer. But what will the future of the animal look like? Thinking about that requires ongoing imagination. And not to forget the courage to let go of the existing and to enter into a dialogue with the animals.

For the time being, there are two clearly distinguishable developments: a further intensification of livestock farming with (a great many) animals and - on the other hand - agriculture without or with a small number of animals. It will probably be the circumstances that will lead to whether and when the two trends come together. Perhaps large parts of our fertile delta will turn into a swampy marsh in the coming decades due to the climate crisis, in which only livestock farming in stables on poles will be possible. There will undoubtedly be hardcore livestock industrialists who will try this out, encouraged by animal feed companies that are used to transporting raw

materials over great distances. Perhaps we will have to deal with the consequences of war, in whatever form, much more than we do now, and times of hunger will dawn. Perhaps a different kind of crisis will come, which will shake our current system of food production.

Let us assume that the circumstances will not change too much. What we are dealing with now is difficult enough: persistent animal diseases, an increasing lack of clean drinking water and affordable agricultural land, a lack of personnel, threats to public health, loss of biodiversity. If something like a meat tax and further legal restrictions are added to this, it could well be that intensive livestock farming will disappear from our country within twenty to thirty years. This will not happen all at once, but gradually. If you look at the figures, you will see that the process of "exiting" has already begun.

This creates space for a very diverse society of human and non-human beings who are involved in the production of food in one way or another or otherwise make use of each other's services, without there being any instrumental value of one for the other.

Will we still be talking about animal welfare then? Probably not. That concept will probably forever be linked to a phase in which we slowly said goodbye to a country with millions of livestock, before we switched to a society based on animal dignity, in the true sense of the word. That is to say: a society based on reverence, respect and protection of human and non-human beings, in which the dignity of both is equally respected, without any reservations.