Drivers for animal welfare policies in Asia, the Far East and Oceania

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Summary
The complex and diverse nature of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) region for Asia, the Far East and Oceania presents both challenges and opportunities in implementing improved approaches to animal welfare. Drivers for improvements include social values, culture, religion, political interest, trade, an increasing global awareness of animal welfare issues, an increasing demand for meat and dairy products, the interest of non-governmental organisations, and the mandate given to the OIE to develop science-based standards for animal welfare. The outcomes-based OIE standards can be amended in the light of new scientific knowledge and implemented by countries in a manner best suited to meet their needs. A number of regional initiatives are described, including a regional strategy, examples of national activities, projects run by the OIE Collaborating Centre for Animal Welfare Science and Bioethical Analysis, and trade measures. Although the overall outlook for improvements in the region looks promising, implementation of standards over the longer term will require ongoing political commitment, resources and cultural change to ensure sustained improvements.

Keywords
Collaborating Centre – Focal Point – OIE standard – Policy driver – Regional strategy.

Introduction
The organisational structure of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) divides Member Countries into five regions, each of which is represented by a Regional Commission. The Regional Commission for Asia, the Far East and Oceania (Fig. 1) has 36 Members, five of which are also members of other Regional Commissions as a consequence of geographic location (1). The region is a dynamic environment containing the largest human and animal populations and animal protein resources of all the OIE regions. It has an enormous and complex diversity of geography, culture, language and religion, and a huge variety of legal, production, social and political systems (2). Economic circumstances and rates of development vary considerably between developing, in-transition and developed countries. Although the Pacific Islands have small numbers of animals, these animals play important roles in the culture and economies of communities.

Fig. 1
The OIE region for Asia, the Far East and Oceania

Population growth in the Asia, Far East and Oceania region is expected to increase significantly in line with the projected global population increase from six to nine billion people by 2050 (3). This population growth, coupled with increasing incomes leading to changes in lifestyles and dietary habits, has resulted in the expectation that meat
consumption will rise by 73% and dairy consumption by 58% by 2015 compared to current levels (2). In order to accommodate this demand, intensive livestock and aquaculture production and trade in livestock and livestock products is increasing in the region, bringing with it an increasing focus on animal welfare.

Global awareness, societal views (albeit differing) and adverse publicity have meant that governments and communities have had to recognise that animal welfare is a major public policy issue and needs to be managed carefully to improve the status of animals, contribute to human well-being and support production. All of these issues have significant implications for the welfare of production animals, companion animals and wildlife. The many drivers for improvements in animal welfare — social, political, economic, cultural, religious and trade — have seen a number of positive and progressive developments in certain countries in the region, although with others there may be a long way to go.

The region strongly supported the initiative of the OIE in 2001 to develop science-based and internationally agreed animal welfare standards and over the years has contributed to the development of policies and standards. Much is going on within the region to improve animal welfare. As it is impossible to cover everything adequately, the paper will highlight some key initiatives in the areas of a regional strategy, some national developments, trade, and Collaborating Centre development. These may provide a general sense of directions being taken.

The Regional Animal Welfare Strategy for Asia, the Far East and Oceania

Animal welfare is recognised as a complex, multifaceted issue that encompasses numerous scientific, economic, religious and cultural dimensions across the globe. It is a shared responsibility between governments, the community, welfare organisations, intergovernmental organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, industry, educational institutions, veterinary associations and scientists, and thus requires constructive and positive engagement between all parties to ensure sustained improvements to animal welfare (4). The OIE has played a significant part in improving animal welfare globally through the development of science- and outcomes-based internationally agreed animal welfare standards.

A key initiative to support implementation of the OIE animal welfare standards contained in the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code* (5) and the *Aquatic Animal Health Code* (6) was the development of a Regional Animal Welfare Strategy (RAWS) for Asia, the Far East and Oceania in 2008. The RAWS is an OIE-agreed strategy that aims to provide an overarching guidance framework that OIE Members can use to achieve animal welfare outcomes consistent with OIE standards and customise them to meet their national needs. It is a ‘living document’ that welcomes amendment in the light of experience and advice from the OIE and the OIE Regional Commission for Asia, the Far East and Oceania. Now in its second edition (2013–2015 [Fig. 2]), the RAWS builds on the endorsed OIE policies and principles to assist the region in its vision of ‘a region where the welfare of animals is respected, promoted and incrementally advanced, simultaneously with the pursuit of progress and socioeconomic development’ (4).

To support the RAWS, the Director General of the OIE agreed to establish the RAWS Coordination Group (RAWS CG) and nominated OIE regional representatives, industry, and an international animal welfare non-governmental organisation (NGO) as its members. The RAWS CG works closely with OIE Members to support the implementation of OIE standards. It also encourages OIE Focal Points for Animal Welfare to reference the strategy when formulating national approaches and encourages the formation of national committees for animal welfare with the designated Focal Point as a key player.

The creation of in-country National Animal Welfare Focal Points has provided a valuable tool to raise awareness of OIE animal welfare standards and encourage OIE Members to engage with the OIE on standards development. Appointed by the OIE with the support of its Members, Focal Points are encouraged to establish and maintain dialogue with the Competent Authority for animal welfare in their country and facilitate cooperation and communication where responsibilities are shared. Through this mechanism,
the OIE aims to establish an effective network of relevant animal welfare experts to facilitate improvements in animal welfare.

The combined efforts of Focal Points and the RAWS CG to implement the RAWS strategy are gradually achieving some success. The RAWS is now recognised as a leading strategy for improving animal welfare not only in the region, but globally, as other regions look to develop their own strategies. On a regional level, the development of a RAWS Action Plan and a RAWS newsletter, together with the establishment of a secure, dedicated website for RAWS CG members and participants to share information, have ensured that the RAWS remains an effective way to facilitate improvements to animal welfare in the region. In other areas, support has been given to the delivery of an initial practical animal welfare course in the region, the first of which was held in Malaysia in 2011. In addition, Thailand has received support for a review of the current OIE standard for the commercial slaughter of poultry for human consumption.

National developments as reported by the Regional Animal Welfare Strategy Coordination Group

Regional Members have reported on national animal welfare developments and achievements through the RAWS CG. These include, but are not limited to (7):

– Malaysia: Malaysia was the host of the Third OIE Global Conference on Animal Welfare, developed the Malaysian Animal Welfare Policy and Strategy, and is developing a Centre of Excellence for Animal Welfare

– Thailand: The Thai Government is finalising the Bill on Cruelty Prevention and Animal Welfare Management and has established the Animal Welfare Sub-committee. The Thai Broiler Processing Export Association is also improving animal welfare education through the employment of poultry welfare officers

– Indonesia: Indonesia conducts biannual national animal welfare meetings, and is undertaking policy developments for animal housing and standards and guidelines for production animals and wildlife

– Republic of Korea: Guidelines for free-range farm certification for layer hens, pig farms, broiler chickens and cattle are being developed and implemented, and the Animal Protection and Welfare Division has been established in the Animal and Plant Quarantine Agency of Korea

– China: Three standards are being produced on the production, transport and slaughter of farm animals, and the Ministry of Agriculture is researching the development of a Chinese national animal welfare strategy, particularly focusing on farm animal welfare

– Bhutan: The 2001 Livestock Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan has been reviewed and the Project for National Dog Population Management and Rabies Control (a joint initiative with the Humane Society International) is now in its second phase.

The World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) is a RAWS CG Member. The Society works with many international partners to achieve its aim of mainstreaming animal welfare. The current priorities for the WSPA include initiatives regarding the inhumane killing of dogs, humane sustainable agriculture, animals in the wild, and animal welfare in disaster management.

The OIE Collaborating Centre for Animal Welfare Science and Bioethical Analysis

The OIE Collaborating Centre for Animal Welfare Science and Bioethical Analysis is a partnership between the New Zealand and Australian Governments, and internationally recognised research institutions in both countries (Box 1) (8). Formed in 2009, the OIE Collaborating Centre aims to formalise the relationships between researchers and increase the pool of experienced scientific staff available to support the OIE’s global welfare mandate and the RAWS in particular.

Box 1
Members of the OIE Collaborating Centre for Animal Welfare Science and Bioethical Analysis

– Animal Welfare Science and Bioethics Centre, Massey University, New Zealand
– Animal Behaviour and Welfare Research Centre, AgResearch Ltd, Ruakura Research Centre, New Zealand
– Animal Welfare Science Centre, Department of Agriculture and Food Systems, University of Melbourne, Australia
– Centre for Animal Welfare and Ethics, Natural Resources Agriculture and Veterinary Services, University of Queensland, Australia
– Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation Livestock Industries, Armidale, Australia
A major focus of the OIE Collaborating Centre is designing training and providing courses in animal welfare research to researchers, government, independent organisations and similar agencies. The Centre is currently working on designing a week-long training course on animal welfare to be delivered in the region. This would involve Animal Welfare Focal Points, academics, veterinary educators and livestock industries.

The Collaborating Centre is also fostering greater research links in the region through twinning projects. An OIE cooperation agreement between the Collaborating Centre and the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of the University of Malaysia is being established to better understand research priorities in the different countries and collaborate on improved animal welfare research. This partnership aims to build animal welfare science capacity and would initially involve programmes in Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and the People’s Republic of China.

The Improved Animal Welfare Programme

Although the place of animal welfare standards in the World Trade Organization multilateral trade context remains under discussion, public pressure, customer requirements and political interest mean the subject cannot be ignored. Trade relations can serve as useful vehicles for aligning best practices in agriculture, and bi-lateral agreements can include harmonised approaches to animal welfare. However, the application of science-based and internationally agreed OIE animal welfare standards developed through a transparent and democratic process are key to success in achieving fair and acceptable animal welfare practices in trade.

A key driver of improved animal welfare practices in countries of the region is the desire to fulfil the export potential of livestock and livestock products and to enter the global market. Importing countries expect acceptable livestock transportation, handling and slaughter practices to be in place as well as a range of biosecurity and health conditions. Both governments and private companies have key roles to play in ensuring the implementation of acceptable animal welfare standards.

In order to support the implementation of OIE livestock handling and slaughter standards, the OIE launched the Improved Animal Welfare Programme (IAWP) in May 2012. This programme is funded by the Australian Government and is targeted at those Member Countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development that are eligible for Official Development Assistance (9). Countries in South-East Asia and the Middle East, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Mauritius have been targeted in the first instance for the three-year programme.

The IAWP aims to provide high-level training to selected in-country trainers on OIE animal welfare standards and their practical implementation in the areas of transportation, pre-slaughter handling and humane slaughter. Veterinarians selected for training to become in-country experts come from government, industry and academia. Training takes place over a three-to-four-month period and comprises classroom and field training as well as distance learning. The final programme element to test competency requires trainees to deliver a training session to in-country veterinarians and stakeholders. Once qualified, and after consultation with government and stakeholders, they disseminate the knowledge gained by delivering training activities in other parts of the country.

The first country to benefit from IAWP was Indonesia in 2012. In-country trainers have since then been very active in advising and consulting local abattoirs and stakeholders on the implementation of OIE codes of practice and standards. Trainees have improved perspectives on humane handling techniques based on a good understanding of animal behaviour, and are more familiar with unacceptable animal welfare practices.

The IAWP complements a number of similar activities aimed at improving animal welfare. The Indonesian Veterinary Medical Association, for example, has sought to strengthen dialogue amongst a range of national stakeholders and has developed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Higher Veterinary Education Forum to include welfare in training for veterinary undergraduates. International NGOs such as the WSPA have run training activities in humane animal slaughter techniques and have supported improvements to stray dog management systems and the welfare of companion animals, particularly in the context of rabies control.

Feedback from participants has so far indicated that the programme has been very well received, and a full evaluation will be conducted mid-way through the programme. What is clear, however, is that the transfer of knowledge to industry and key players will, if implemented correctly on a daily basis, lead to significant animal welfare improvements.

Discussion

Animal welfare is a complex issue, with a range of views held on matters such as definition, ethics, underpinning science and the role and purpose of animals in society. Notwithstanding differences, it is to the credit of OIE
Members and partners that agreement has been reached on a total of twelve OIE science- and outcomes-based animal welfare standards. This is in response to a clear societal view that some current practices are unacceptable and must be corrected and improved.

It is important to recognise that OIE standards are not ‘set in stone’ and that they will be modified in the light of experience, scientific developments, and best practice. Further, the fact that they are outcomes-based allows countries the flexibility of determining their own approaches to meeting overall animal welfare objectives (10).

Implementation of standards globally at a uniform rate via regional initiatives is not possible because of factors such as the socio-economic situations in developing, in-transition and developed countries; cultural and religious differences; and national priorities. However, it is possible to improve animal welfare by accepting the fact that this will be a progressive longer term activity – ‘evolution rather than revolution’ – and will require a wider understanding and acceptance of the welfare needs of animals to ensure gains made are sustained.

Key to success is political support and the provision of resources, both cash and in-kind. In this latter regard, a number of countries, such as Australia and some countries of the EU, are providing assistance to the OIE and countries in the region to progress the animal welfare agenda. Non-governmental organisations such as the WSPA, which can play pivotal roles in improving animal welfare, are also providing support. Education, training, communication, legislation and research all have a part to play in improving animal welfare, as do the development of strategies at regional and national level and the full cooperation of all parties in the implementation of animal welfare activities.

**Conclusion**

Animal welfare is a key global policy issue with a strong public demand for improvement. There is no room for unacceptable practices and complacency. The Regional Commission for Asia, the Far East and Oceania is seeking to support OIE animal welfare standards by developing a strategic framework to help guide OIE Members and stakeholders on implementation, including the development of national animal welfare plans. Although measurable progress has and is being made by a number of countries in the region, others often lack awareness of, and commitment to, the need for change. Overall, however, the outlook holds considerable promise for improved approaches to animal welfare.

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des normes sur le bien-être animal qui soient fondées scientifiquement. Les normes de l’OIE sont centrées sur les résultats et sont susceptibles d’évoluer à la lumière des nouvelles connaissances scientifiques, les pays pouvant adapter les modalités de mise en œuvre en fonction de leurs besoins particuliers. Les auteurs décrivent un certain nombre d’initiatives régionales, notamment l’adoption d’une stratégie régionale, les activités spécifiques conduites au niveau national, les contributions du Centre collaborateur de l’OIE pour la science du bien-être animal et l’analyse bioéthique et les avancées dans le domaine commercial. Si le bilan des améliorations constatées dans la région est globalement prometteur, la mise en œuvre durable des normes nécessitera un engagement politique sur le long terme, ainsi que des ressources et un changement culturel pour consolider ces améliorations dans le temps.

Mots-clés
Centre collaborateur – Moteur politique – Normes de l’OIE – Point focal – Stratégie régionale.

Motores de las políticas de bienestar animal en la región de Asia, Extremo Oriente y Oceanía

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Resumen
El carácter complejo y heterogéneo de la región de Asia, Extremo Oriente y Oceanía de la Organización Mundial de Sanidad Animal (OIE) conlleva a la vez problemas y oportunidades a la hora de aplicar mejores soluciones en materia de bienestar animal. Entre los motores que impulsan cambios positivos están la creciente conciencia mundial respecto del tema, los valores sociales, la cultura, la religión, el interés político, el comercio, la creciente demanda de productos cárnicos y lecheros y las presiones de organizaciones no gubernamentales, así como el mandato que tiene encomendado la OIE de formular normas científicamente fundamentadas de bienestar animal. Las normas de la OIE, que se basan en los resultados obtenidos, pueden ir evolucionando a la luz de los nuevos conocimientos científicos y ser aplicadas por los países del modo más acorde con sus necesidades. Los autores describen una serie de iniciativas regionales, entre ellas una estrategia regional, diversos ejemplos de actividades nacionales, nuevas líneas de trabajo en el Centro Colaborador de la OIE para la ciencia del bienestar animal y el análisis bioético y medidas en el ámbito del comercio. Aunque las perspectivas generales de mejora en la región parecen prometedoras, la aplicación de normas a largo plazo para obtener mejoras duraderas exigirá una indesmayable voluntad política, así como recursos y también una evolución cultural.

Palabras clave
References


