Understanding Animal Welfare: The Science in its Cultural Context
by David Fraser

This very readable book is designed to be of interest to students of animal welfare science, veterinarians and others working in animal care professions, animal scientists and animal producers, as well as staff in private and public sector organisations concerned with animal welfare policy and practice.

In a 40-year-plus academic career, from PhD studies in Glasgow to his current professorial position at the University of British Columbia, David Fraser has made a major contribution to the international animal welfare science and ethics peer-reviewed literature. He has established a reputation as a highly-regarded international contributor who has enriched the animal welfare debate and combines an in-depth appreciation and understanding of the scientific elements of animal welfare with the equally important cultural and ethical dimensions. From an academic base, Fraser has also made an extremely important contribution to international bodies such as the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the FAO and North American food industry organisations. His contribution to the OIE Animal Welfare Working Group, since its establishment in 2002, has been important and highly-valued and has demonstrated his commitment to emphasising the critical importance of the cultural context and associated societal values when establishing animal welfare standards and formulating animal welfare policy.

The book emphasises the dramatic increase in public, political, media and scientific interest in animal welfare over the last sixty years, and uses specific examples involving orcas and wolves in Canada, fox hunting in the United Kingdom and layer hen housing in Europe to illustrate the ‘sea change’ in public attitudes.

Fraser emphasises the ‘mandated’ nature of animal welfare science: i.e., science that owes its origin to the need to inform a public desire to revise, amend or justify existing policy and practice in relation to the use of animals in agriculture, science or for recreational, entertainment or other purposes. The study of animal welfare science emphasises the interplay between ‘facts’ and ‘values’ and the complexity of interpretation in multi-disciplinary fields. As such, he argues that animal welfare science can be considered as a case study of the role of animals and society.

This view accords well with the OIE’s acceptance of, and strategic approach to, animal welfare as ‘a complex international public policy issue with important scientific, economic, cultural and religious dimensions and important trade policy implications’. The book is conveniently, and logically, divided into three separate parts,

Part 1, ‘Animal welfare in context’, covers the following topics: animals and moral concern, animals in the human mind, a good life for animals and the science of animal welfare. A historical context is provided for the relationship between animals and humans going back to ancient Greece and the sixth Century BC.

Part 2 of the book deals with the methods of animal welfare science,
This is a delightful book, full of interesting aspects of animal welfare.
An excellent guide to the academic study of animal welfare science."
Marian Stamp Dawkins, Department of Zoology, University of Oxford

while Part 3 deals with the complexity of attempting to draw conclusions about animal welfare when evidence derived from different methodologies may well be contradictory.

Fraser has previously expressed the view that ‘As it has unfolded to date, the animal welfare debate has been disappointing intellectually, ethically and politically: intellectually, because the debate has not resulted in a genuine understanding of how animal agriculture affects animals, the environment, and the good of the public; ethically, because the polemical nature of many of the accounts of animal agriculture has tended to polarise the debate and to prevent real ethical analysis of important issues; and politically, because this polarised debate has failed to create a climate of dialogue and consensus building. As a first step towards rectifying these problems, there is an urgent need for scientists and ethicists to avoid simply aligning themselves with advocacy positions and instead to provide knowledgeable research and analysis of the issues.’

This book makes a major contribution to addressing this frustration and is recommended reading for those who want to make a positive contribution to the notion of positive, ethically-principled, science-based animal welfare change management. The book will be particularly valuable to policy architects working within the public, private and NGO sectors. The book’s publication is also very timely, as the OIE continues to pursue its international animal welfare leadership role by actively engaging with stakeholder groups and developing standards and policies which recognise the existence of vastly different cultural contexts and the complexity of addressing animal welfare at a global rather than a national or regional level.