Allowing goats to be goats: achieving “naturalness” in farm systems

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Domestication of animals to adapt them to human systems is a millennia-old concept, but each species retains many of its natural behaviours. The ability to exhibit these behaviours is often eroded as production systems intensify, leading to compromised welfare.

The goat’s ability to adapt to harsh environments and variable human needs has resulted in a worldwide population of over one billion goats in 2014. While the majority of these goats are in smallholdings, demand for goat milk products has led to a growth in intensive dairy goat systems focused on increasing production. These systems have developed by extrapolation from intensive dairy cow systems, thereby resulting in goats being managed in facilities and with methods designed for cattle. We propose that there are significant differences in natural behaviour between goats and cattle, suggesting that goat welfare could be compromised. We must therefore re-evaluate these production systems in order to better allow ‘a goat to be a goat’. The support for this proposal comes from our current six-year research programme to provide best practice guidelines for the dairy goat industry in New Zealand. The research has highlighted some specific areas where opportunities exist to enable natural behaviour. These include the use of feeding systems that allow a more natural posture for a browsing species, as well as elevated and varied flooring surfaces that are preferred by goats. Many goats also have the potential for multi-year lactation and appropriate utilization of this trait could provide benefits such as prevention of health issues, reduction in excess kids and continued milk production.

Farming systems that enable species-specific expression of behaviour will be an increasing requirement for fostering a future where positive animal welfare, animal production and public perception are harmonised.

Key words: adaptation – change – dairy goats – natural behaviours.