

What is animal welfare?

Animal welfare broadly refers to the feelings and physical wellbeing of an individual animal. Some concepts of welfare also include naturalness. There are many different definitions and models of animal welfare¹, some of which are outlined in Table 1.

Each definition has different strengths and weaknesses depending on the precise animal welfare context, such as which species you are working with, what you are concerned about, and what timescale you are considering. For example, different concepts of animal welfare may be needed for deciding (i) what environmental enrichment to give to frogs in zoos, (ii) the quality of life of an elderly paraplegic dog, or (iii) the most humane method for identification-marking cattle.

Different definitions can be viewed as a ‘toolkit’ of concepts to help tackle different problems on a case-by-case basis, rather than there being a single universal definition of welfare. A fitting welfare definition or model can help users decide what to measure and/or by what criteria to assess welfare.

Table 1. Example definitions and models of animal welfare. The definitions are arranged from feelings-based definitions, through more health or biologically based definitions, and ending in resource-based models. Many more good definitions of animal welfare exist than can be listed here.

Definition or Model	Reference
“Animal welfare is to do with the feelings experienced by animals: the absence of strong negative feelings , usually called suffering, and (probably) the presence of positive feelings , usually called pleasure.”	2
“Are the animals healthy ? Do they have what they want ?”	3
The degree of correspondence between the adaptations that the animal possesses and the challenges it faces. Adaptations include anatomy, physiology, behaviour and subjective feelings. Challenges include the environment, resources and events.	4
“The welfare of an individual is its state as regards its attempts to cope with its environment.” This includes how much effort is required to be able to cope and the extent to which those attempts are successful.	5
“The state of the animal's body and mind , and the extent to which its nature (genetic traits manifest in breed and temperament) is satisfied... However, the 3 aspects of welfare sometimes conflict...”	6
The extent of an animal’s freedom to live in accordance with its biological nature or ‘ telos ’, such as in a naturalistic habitat.	7
The Five Domains : nutrition, environment, health, behaviour, and mental state.	8
The Five Freedoms : freedom from hunger and thirst; discomfort; pain, injury or disease; and fear and distress; and freedom to express normal behaviour.	9, 10
The Five Needs : “[an animal’s] need for a suitable environment,... for a suitable diet,... to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns,... to be housed with, or apart from, other animals, and... to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.”	11



Related and commonly confused concepts

An animal's welfare can be affected by its health and disease, husbandry, human-animal relationship and – depending on what the animal is used for – its productivity or performance. However, animal welfare is not the same as those concepts. Animal welfare is also commonly confused with things like conservation (which aims to preserve species, rather than to protect individual wellbeing), and ethics (which refers to decision-making processes about what is morally right or wrong).

References

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What is Animal Welfare, September 2020 © Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF)