

ANIMAL CRUELTY

A veterinarian friend told me that he was called out a few months ago by a rancher to check on his horses. It was a most unusual call, as the rancher said, "Nothing's wrong with them, but my neighbor says that they're being abused." When the vet arrived, he found the horses to be in good condition, albeit thin from scarce grazing as the long winter was ending. The horses were in good health, but the new neighbor (who had never owned horses, and had recently relocated from an urban center) thought they look malnourished, and had called the sheriff's office that, in turn, sent out the Humane Society to check on the animals. Upon being contracted by the Humane Society, the rancher who had relied on his hired-man was seriously concerned that they might be in some danger, so he called his veterinarian to check on them. He was relieved to find out they were thin, but in fine condition for that time of year. With that report, the Humane Society convinced the neighbor to back off from his demand for criminal charges.

As suburbanization continues and country life becomes increasingly rare, even in wide-open places such as Colorado, changes in our cultural norms are to be expected. Animals that were once thought of as utilitarian beings are increasingly thought of as pets or even sentient beings. These changes are creating a shift, not only in how animals should be cared for by

humans, but also what constitutes animal cruelty and what rights animals should be given.

All states have laws that prohibit cruelty to horses and other animals. Most states allow the government to seize an animal that has been found to have been cruelly treated. The statutes in Colorado governing animal cruelty have been updated on many occasions over the past two decades to keep pace with these changing social norms.

Many states also give a special role to the Humane Society (not to be confused with the HSUS, which is a left-wing animal rights advocacy group) or the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In addition to state laws governing the humane treatment of animals, certain governing bodies have also created regulations. For instance, the Code of the United States Hunter Jumper Association (USHJA) requires that every person involved in showing horses adhere to the USHJA's Code of Conduct for the Welfare of the Horse. The USHJA Horse Welfare Committee states that, "Horses are one of only a few animals used as athletes, often required to undergo extensive training before reaching their physiological or psychological limits as competitive individuals. Under these circumstances, decisions about horse welfare may be strongly influenced by the potential benefits to the rider, the owner or trainer."

The Committee has set the following ideals: All equestrians must acknowledge and accept that at all times the welfare of the horse is the first priority, and must never be second to competitive or personal commercial influences. The well-being of the horse takes precedence over the demands of trainers, riders, owners, organizers, sponsors or officials. Competition management must always consider the horses' welfare relative to the competition and schooling areas, ground surfaces, weather conditions, stabling, equipment and other related site safety issues. Adequate provisions must be made for ventilation, feeding, watering, and maintaining a healthy environment when horses are stabled on competition grounds. In the interests of the horse, the competence of the rider is considered essential. The highest level of veterinary care available must be provided at all levels of competition. In short, the Committee has set very high level goals for animal welfare, which may be at odds with the ordinary level of care which is common to agricultural situations. This highlights the issue of evolving norms.

As these norms and ideals continue to grow, we grow, too, as pet and livestock owners. The challenge may be, that as we grow, we must not forget the roots from which these domesticated animals come, as well as differing accepted animal husbandry practices, which may vary depending upon disciplines and locals. **H**

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