

## **Animal Management and Animal Welfare at the Snake River Farm PART 1**

My purpose is to write about the handling of animals. That includes bison, cattle horses, hogs and sheep.

In order to explain animal handling here, I believe I need to put animal welfare into context. Context means a shared understanding of animal nature.

To make this manageable for me and hopefully palatable for you, I will divide this topic into segments of around 1000 words.

Actual research or scholarly teaching on the topics of animal behavior, animal social relationships or animal welfare is scarce. Especially sparse relating to farm livestock. The information that exists is mostly about efforts to limit cruel behavior. That information focuses on humane slaughter.

Most of the written information is about horses. Probably because horses fill a dual role. In the US, they are both livestock and pets.

Good farmers and animal handlers have for thousands of years acquired and used the knowledge necessary for the welfare of their animals. ***Today, automation and the economies of scale are separating farmers from animals.*** When that happens, the animals fall to the level of biological units on an asset list. In that situation, only the short term physical needs of the animals are considered.

### **Livestock are different from pets.**

The definitions of those words, “livestock” and “pets” are somewhat vague and ambiguous.

Livestock are farm animals, raised and kept for food or work needs.

Pets are animals that provide companionship to humans.

In general, livestock satisfy physical needs of humans; pets satisfy psychological needs of humans.

Both livestock and pets are “domesticated.”

In this article, bison, even though not domesticated are considered livestock.

The exceptions to the definitions I have given above are numerous.

In the first draft of this section, I wrote, “in the context of this farm all five are livestock.” Gail pointed out that is not correct.

I like to think I treat all of our livestock with equal respect.

That is not true.

Animals die unexpectedly on every farm. When a cow, hog or chicken dies on this farm, I compost the carcass or recycle it to the wildlife.

If a horse dies, I dig a deep hole in the savanna. I bury it as I have buried all our dead horses for 40 years. Our horses are treated as livestock when living but pets when they die.

### **Animal Welfare.**

We all care about animal welfare.

On the list of goals for our farm, animal welfare is the top value.

There are different viewpoints on how to achieve high animal welfare.

I believe ***people think about the nature of animals incorrectly.***

We tend to think that animals perceive the world as we experience it, just less so.

That is incorrect. Animal senses, animal brains are much different from ours.

We think that animal social needs are similar to ours. There are similarities but the differences are vast.

We tend to think of “human nature” and “animal nature” as if all animals can be lumped.

They cannot. The social structure of pigs is as different from that of horses, as horses are different from us.

***Each species must be understood and managed according to its nature.***

### **Overview of Animal Group Structure.**

***All animals have a social life. Understanding their social needs is crucial to providing a low stress (high welfare) environment for them.***

There is little research or study into the social needs of farm animals.

The five species I will write about, bison, horse, cattle, hogs and sheep are all considered herd animals. The definition for herd is very broad. It is so broad that I think it makes better sense to describe these as “social” animals.

**Bison** form primary groups of 15 to 20. These groups are led by one or several mature cows. The primary group typically consists of cows, calves, yearlings and adolescent females. Males over two years old are driven away. There is a mature bull involved but his involvement with the herd is seasonal.

***Bison have an extremely strict hierarchy or pecking order.*** That order requires space between animals. Outside juveniles cannot blend into an existing herd. Unrelated, producing females (cows with calves) may blend in over time. ***Bison enforce their hierarchy violently and instantly.***

The enormous bison herds of history were actually collections of family groups. There was little scientific study of bison before their near annihilation. Not much reliable information exists. The better observers reported that the large herds of thousands consisted of many family groups of 20 or so.

**Cattle** form social groups similar to bison.

Domestic cattle establish a pecking order. Like bison, senior cows are dominant. Those cows are quite “bossy” in behavior. The pecking rank between lesser members is not sharply defined. Physical space between individuals is not as important to cattle as it is to bison. Rank is expressed primarily regarding access to feed or water. The boss cows and their nursing calves take first access.

Texas Longhorns are our best example of feral cattle. Longhorns descended from loose Spanish cattle. They prospered for over 400 years without human involvement. At their peak, in the mid 1800s, they numbered in the millions.

**Mustang horses**, like longhorn cattle, originally descended from Spanish animals. Mustangs form bands of 5 to 15. All domestic horses with enough space to do so form similar bands. The band is assembled and held together by the herding actions of a stallion. The stallion collects breeding age mares and holds the group together by what we would recognize as herding.

Horses cannot be gelded, (castrated) until they are over one year old. Because of that, gelded horses retain significant male characteristics. Geldings will frequently express stallion-like behavior. i.e. Dominant geldings form herds.

**Pigs** form family groups that fall short of what most of us think of as a herd.

Wild pigs and feral domestic pigs behave similarly. Several reproducing females form a group called a “sounder”. Sounders consist of 20 to 50 animals including piglets. Adult males, boars, perform no social function other than breeding. They join the groups only temporarily and only for that purpose.

**Sheep form flocks** of any size. Sheep may be the most domesticated of livestock. It is difficult imagining domestic sheep surviving in a feral environment.

Sheep are basically defenseless prey. A ewe will aggressively defend her lamb but they are not particularly effective in dealing with common predators. Coyotes and dogs can kill many lambs in a short time.

Sheep under stress form very tight groups. Each animal pushes into the flock trying to avoid being on the outside. They do so to avoid being the animal most accessible to a predator. That may be their only effective defense. This tight flocking behavior eliminates almost all sense of pecking order or rank. As a corollary to that tight flocking behavior, sheep have a strong inclination to follow each other.

Next sections will each concentrate on a single species.  
In those sections, I will focus on animal handling here at the Snake River Farm.  
Best regards.  
Tom