

Renée Meissner: Practical experiences with welfare and ethics

PowerPoint-presentation, Lüneburg, September 2008

Introduction:

My name is Renée Meissner. I work as a free lance advisor on herd management in the Netherlands and some times abroad.

I was working with herds of horses and cattle in natural areas since the eighties of last century. During these years I worked with many different organisations throughout the country, such as Ark Foundation and FREE nature.

ppt-Slide 1: . 20 years of natural grazing resulted in a new view on welfare and ethics of rewilded, dedomesticated herds of cattle and horses. The new word “dedomestication“ shows that the animals changed during the process of rewilding.

ppt-Slide 2: Semi wild living herds are a new, but already rather common phenomena in the Netherlands. It is quit different from historic shepherding or managing systems. The animals differ from livestock and kept horses in many ways. In most cases they became less individual and more social herd members. How to deal with welfare and ethics is one of the consequences .Learning by practical experiences, made new criteria for natural herds in medium seized landscapes. Execution of regulation and legislation of agricultural animals are in some cases no longer relevant. In this presentation I will show you what happened with the animals characteristics and how exceptions of the existing rules were made .

ppt-Slide 3: gc

ppt-Slide 4: The following topics of the presentation makes things more clear.

In what places do we find this new phenomena of wild living herds, what is a so-called track B area, not to be confused with track A. What is a rewilded herd? Which regulation is valid, which exceptions were made? What does it mean for the management, for genetics and inbreeding, for veterinarian actions or treatment? What are the achievements of the animals by now and do we have wishes for the future?

ppt-Slide 5:

Before talking in detail, we must not forget that welfare of the animals has a strong relation with the limitations and circumstances in their living field.

The bigger the area, the bigger the herd can and will be .But accordingly a bigger herd means more space to develop naturalness in behaviour, population dynamics e. o. As naturalness is high, human intervenience is less necessary, less wanted and can even be unethical.

For example: do not take a wounded animal out off the herd for treatment, it will loose its place in the hierarchy and will be wounded again after the fight to regain it.

ppt-Slide 6:

What do we mean by track B? In such a field grazing is seen as a process and the herds are part of the ecosystem. The surface is, more or less, from 30 ha up to some hundreds. Human interference is restricted, but the herds are only partly self sufficient, e. g. densities are controlled.

In the Netherlands we have about 10 000 animals on 50.000 ha like this.

The herds live here year round without extra feeding in natural, social herds. There are as many males as females of all ages. The regulation is based on agriculture, but some exceptions have been made officially. Such as the 100 ha earmark rule, which will be explained further on.

ppt-Slide 7:

Let me tell you what we mean by rewilded herds. Since the start of this natural grazing some 25 years ago, people did not bring in many new animals. Instead the herds grew and animals were exchanged between them. Therefore we can consider this as closed populations per breed .Their rewilding or dedomestication , caused many changes. Most used cattle breeds are Galloways, Scottish Highland and Heck. Horses are Polish Konik.

By now, their phenotypes changed, and Scottish breeders do not consider them anymore as typical representatives of the studbook breed. The cattle became drier and smaller and the horses got more uniform. But there was more, but not visible. They developed their hormonal cyclus into birth

synchronisation. This results in a synchronised rutting period as a consequence. They regained natural behaviour like group conformation, leadership, and a before unknown phenomena as mourning. Cattle give births to their first calves later, due to natural selection. We see less hoof and claw problems, less laminitis in horses, probably due to a more natural energy spending. Body condition is a worth full graduator for management. We found that they maintained their body condition much better throughout the year.

And then, most impressive to see: they achieved new skills like swimming, browsing techniques and orientation.

We can say that the rewilded herds have an impressive knowledge to practise varied foraging. They know how, where and when to find both rich and structure full grasses, minerals, vitamins, even medicines in plants, shrubs and trees.

ppt-Slide 8:

Synchronised births give many advantages. The milk is richer in springtime. While the herd is grazing, the calves form crèches that are looked after by an adult; a short period of young calves means less energy loss for the adults.

ppt-Slide 9:

Natural horse groups consist of harem groups (leading stallions and adult mares with young offspring), bachelor groups and sometimes sub-adult groups.

Natural groups in cattle are matriarchal organised groups of adult females and young offspring, satellite like bull groups and solitary old bulls. Exchange of animals is better be done group like, to keep the staying herd in natural balance and to prevent too much stress in the new field.

ppt-Slide 10:

Natural herds stimulate leadership. Leading stallions or leading mares are very important and there is a strong natural selection on them. Leading animals most of the time produce leading offspring.

Leaders are the first to develop new skills and traditions, and are genetically often dominant.

In practise it means that you should never take a leading animal out off the field. But take the adult offspring to start a new herd in a new area. He or she will know how to discover it.

Rutting period for cattle is in July, august and is attended by heavy roars that can bear several km. The sound can be so low that human cannot hear it. Horses have the rutting period three weeks after the births of the foals, in April, May.

ppt-Slide 11:

Mourning in herds may be comparable with elephants. We do not know much about it, but it is impressive to see. The higher the social position of the animal, the longer it takes. All members come to see the dead body, touch it or make a special noise. Apparently there is a need for it and this makes it un ethical to take the body away directly. Anyway, a dead calf or foal will be looked for by the mother, with outbreaks as a result in case it was taken away too soon. So it is better to leave it until the mother accepts death.

ppt-Slide 12:

New skills can be confusing for the management. Simple fences or bounding waters may not keep them in anymore. It can even lead to discussion with animal welfare groups or even policemen and judges.

ppt-Slide 13:

Some years ago an organisation was brought to court because of neglect. In the river forelands horses learned very well to swim. In this winter the river raised so high that they could only stay on and behind the dike or on a small island. They choose for the island and after the rangers had led them to the mainland, they swam back. They could find food if they wanted. They were in good shape and in social order. Months later the judge gave acquittal. "The animals could choosed for their welfare themselves; the owners were not obliged to interfere."

ppt-Slide 14:

How do we know so many details about this wild living animals.

Ark foundation made an extensive data base. From each individual animal a DNA sample was taken. Recorded data were: age, sexes, pedigree, identification nr, offspring, live history and health history.

Free nature has taken over the management of this database. Many other organisations join this practise. Besides this, many students did field researches during the past years.

ppt-Slide 15, 16, 17: Example of a Galloway cow.

ppt-Slide 18:

We have to deal with the official regulations that are based on agriculture, s.a.:

- Duty of Identification, cattle by earmarks and horses by transponder and passport
- Animals have to be killed in slaughterhouses
- Natural died carcasses have to be destructed
- Animal transport is conform new rules: each animal apart and attached
- Each citizen has to care for animal health and welfare. To let suffer is punishable.

ppt-Slide 19:

However, during the last decennium, official exceptions on these regulations were realised.

- In area's bigger than 100 ha, calves have a delayed period for earmarking (2004/764/EG). Calves: report birth date, mother and sexes. Earmarking up to 6 months. From 7 to 12 months with DNA test.
- Horses: Horses living in nature areas don't need a transponder until they are in a corral or brought out of the area. P.V.V. by I & R order for horses.
- Shooting is allowed in case animals are too wild to catch or too dangerous.
- Transport in groups of un attached animals is allowed.

ppt-Slide 22:

Adapted management.

Since we learned about natural social behaviour, we confirm our human interference to it.

For the management it means:

- Transports preferably in natural groups
- Introductions in new areas by one or more natural social groups, each with a leading animal
- Animal reducing preferably conform natural groups (harems, stallion group, young bulls, cattle mother-daughter group)

ppt-Slide 23:

One of the most spectacular insights we found is the natural avoidance of inbreeding.

Both horses and cattle do this in a different way, but always by separation and partner choice.

ppt-Slide 24: Horses **ppt-Slide 25:** cattle

In a schedule of the social groups and their separation pattern, it is made visible how genes spread through a population, like a flow, while taking time of several generations.

The DNA results made this 'system' clear.

ppt-Slide 26, 27:

From student researches we start to get some insight about migration of herds. Despite relatively small areas, you do find some seasonal migration. These natural phenomena and its ethical consequences need further research. Future will show what ecological corridors add to this natural need.

ppt-Slide 28:

Animal healthcare and natural herds: rangers shall always try to find the balance between treatment or natural recovering. Even killing can be a better decision than treatment, from an ethic point of view. In general animals can recover by themselves far better than most people, even veterinarians think.

ppt-Slide 29:

Same can be said about maintenance of hoof and claw conditions

ppt-Slide 30:

In general one can say that in the first years of natural grazing in the Netherlands, most owner organisations maintained official health statuses. Mainly to set neighbouring farmers at ease. However, to avoid taking blood samples regularly, this is now often replaced by checks in cooperation with the national veterinary office. The same is practised for parasite controls. As anti-parasite medicines are a disaster for the ecosystem, they are not applied. Mineral deficiencies are even more complicated to deal with. Adaptation takes time and during this time, withhold of minerals is unethical. The best solution is to realise bigger and more varied grazing areas.

ppt-Slide 31:

As a conclusion it must be said that respect for wildness, naturalness, for herd tradition, is a great thing.

ppt-Slide 32:

What looks like just grazing, can be a lot more. It is also self-medication and prevention of illnesses. We gave them a start to live a dedomesticated life, but they are taking over.

ppt-Slide 33:

Some wishes for the future are:

- Official status for dedomesticated or rewilded horses and cattle
- Field slaughter units
- More cooperation on national and international level
- Legal room for carcasses in the field
- Better recognition in Brussels

ppt-Slide 34:

Last but not least: to realise those wishes, we need the support of the public. In the Netherlands:

- Grazing is accepted and appreciated.
- Free entrance in most areas.
- Signs positive, clear and equal.
- Information and explanation about do's and don'ts.
- Local publicity in daily papers, websites etc.
- School and youth activities.
- Wilderness enjoyment is valued by and possible for many people.

ppt-Slide 35:

no comment

ppt-Slide 36:

Thank you!