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To:

The Editor

Wallowa County Chieftain

Enterprise, Oregon

Branding Calves on Prairie Creek and The Treatment of Animals

Your March 23 article on a proposed law to protect animals (I neither support nor oppose this bill) unearthed memories of my childhood on Prairie Creek in 1954 when I was eight years old.

Behind the Big Blue Barn (now a site of romantic weddings) was a place of the annual spring rite of branding, castrating, vaccinating, and dehorning the new calves born in Jan-Feb. My parents, Ray and Azalea Hockett, had about 100 cows with calves, plus the yearlings. As an eight-year-old my responsibility was to keep the irons red hot in a fire near the holding chute, and to hand them to Dad once the calf was secured. Then to take them from him and get them hot again for the next calf. As a child I simply did my duty and ignored the mayhem about me, but as an adult the memories of that process have dug deeply into my psyche. The graphic images of those annual two spring days are as clear in my mind as if it were yesterday.

Our calves experienced peak stress as they were separated from their mothers for the first time, then pushed into the chute, BANG the head gate locked, now collapse the sides tightly, rotate the chute 90°, vaccinate, castrate if male, and bring down the red-hot CT branding iron with force to sear the tender pink side skin to a crisp black as the smell of burnt flesh wafted over us. Then the chute was rotated vertical, the nose bar clamp with the bloody burlap wrap was brought across their face and cinched down to the chute. The ears were cut open, the small horn buds were sliced off with a knife, and the red-hot dehorning iron was brought down hard on each side of the head until the skin and skull smoked with two round blackened depressions. The bloody faced calf was then released to stumble from the chute in a state of shock. Repeat 90-100 times more. At the first touch of the CT iron the calf would begin to bawl, thrash, kick, bang the head in a wild attempt to escape the pain. At the first touch of the dehorning iron the thrashing resistance would become even wilder, rolling of the eyes, slobber flinging, ramming the head back against the chute gate as the hot iron stayed on the head for 5 seconds on each side.

Least you think I exaggerate realize that a cousin came up from Portland one spring to attend branding. He lasted all of two calves before turning very pale and left for the ranch house. No, this is not about being a bleeding-heart moderate. This is about showing respect for other beings. My Dad was not a brutal man, I once had to put down a cancer eyed cow for him as a teenager because he did not have the heart to do it, and he could walk and stand among the cows in the pasture without them moving away. No, this was simply the accepted way branding was done in the fifties.

Veterinarian schools have since documented the extreme stress and pain of this process (elevated heart rate, blood cortisol concentration, respiratory rate, exertion pressure against restraints). Physiological symptoms can last up to 8 hours. The pain at the burnt skin nerves lasts up to 8 weeks. National veterinarian associations are now pressuring industry to abandon this way of treating cattle.

Why do we do this to animals? Custom, ignorance, lack of compassion, meanness, money, the list is long that implicates us. In general, it comes down to not respecting animals as having intelligence and feelings, rather we look at them as economic entities, like a tractor or bale of hay. In the last few decades a great deal of basic research has opened up our knowledge about the cognitive intelligence (self-awareness) of animals. Whales learn new songs they hear from other whale populations, dolphins have used their sonar to convey to a researcher a pregnancy that she was unaware of, apes know when looking in a mirror that the image is themselves and not a generic ape, elephants have complex family networks, birds learn from others how to become tool users, and the list gets longer each year.

At 75 years of age I have come to believe that animals are not “things” like a tractor, they are intelligent non-human beings with souls. Surely in the 21st Century we have the technology to end this barbaric process.

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