

# **Australian consumers' knowledge of animal agricultural practices: the effect of knowledge on consumer behaviour**

**RSPCA Australia Scholarship for Humane Animal Production Research 2011/12 – Sally Healy**

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## **Introduction**

The area of human-animal studies is growing rapidly. Intensive farming systems – a response to increasing consumer demand for low-priced foods – have given rise to societal concerns for the welfare of farm animals. I am interested whether concern for animal welfare translates to more ethical consumer behaviour, whereby individuals seek out brands that are produced under higher welfare standards.

Intensive animal agricultural systems make up the bulk of farming in the developed world and at a rapid rate in the developing world also. The animal welfare, environmental, social and human health issues that eventuate from intensive animal agricultural systems are of concerns to many members of the general public. However, the literature indicates that despite concerns surrounding animal agriculture, consumers do not have adequate knowledge of the impacts of such systems, and this may either be through a lack of information or the maintenance of a psychological and cultural disconnect between attitudes and behaviour.

My project aims to investigate the role of information in shaping consumer behaviours with regards to animal-based food products. The study will utilise both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to explore the current knowledge that consumers have of intensive animal productions and the importance of animal welfare on their current and future behaviours. Although there are minimum standards for the treatment of production animals, many of these standards do not protect animals from unnecessary suffering. However, there are a number of dairy, egg and meat companies who strive to achieve accreditation status through various welfare-focussed schemes, including the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme, thus ensuring improved animal welfare measures. It is important that the products endorsed by such accreditation schemes are perceived by the public as being of superior quality to other products in which animal welfare is less of a consideration.

## Progress to Date

A literature review was conducted in order to determine previous research in this area. Following this, I constructed an online survey that investigated consumption patterns of animal-based foods – namely eggs, pork, and chicken, and examined participant knowledge of farming systems in Australia. The survey also looked into attitudes towards the treatment of animals, preferences for animal-based foods (including labelling of welfare standards), and socio-demographics. I collected 840 responses from this survey. Overall, results indicated that consumers are concerned about the treatment of farm animals, and admit they have little knowledge of farming – including the meanings behind labels on animal-based foods.

The next stage of my research will be a quasi-experimental study, in which I have organised to recruit 300 participants through a market research company. According to the initial online survey, many people admitted to a lack of understanding of farming and labelling. In this phase, I am testing whether knowledge actually has an influence on what people buy. I have arranged for half of the participants to take part in an information session, in which they will gain knowledge about conventional animal production systems, as well as alternative, more humane brands and products such as the [RSPCA Approved](#) products. The remaining half will form the control group and will not receive any information. Both groups will complete surveys to record their consumer behaviours, the specific animal products they purchase, their perceptions of those products and their rationale for selecting them over alternatives. Consumer behaviours will be recorded five times: twice before the information session (intervention), immediately after the intervention, and twice more in the following six months. Consumer behaviours and product perceptions will be compared between the control group and the experimental group. These data will enable inferences to be made about the role of knowledge in consumer decision-making, as well as highlighting the processes that drive people's behaviour with regards to animal products.

The results of this study are relevant for the stakeholders of the issue, including the producers of animal-based foods who require an understanding of consumer perceptions in order to remain competitive in the market. Understanding the role of knowledge in shaping consumer behaviours is also relevant for animal protection groups, whose work is focused on increasing public awareness of the welfare implications of intensive animal farming. Finally, there are public policy implications of consumer opinions on the treatment of animals and evidence of concern for animal welfare can be used to introduce stricter laws surrounding the treatment of farm animals.