

The truth about sheep...

Sheep Behaviour

Until they get to know them, many people see sheep as dull and uninteresting animals. The truth is very different.

It is often difficult for people to recognise and understand sheep behaviour, because most of us are not used to being around sheep and because their facial structure makes it difficult for us to read emotion on their faces, like most of us can with cats and dogs.

Sheep have uniquely individual natures and are social, intelligent animals. As prey animals, they have a highly-developed flocking instinct, and prefer to move in groups rather than as individuals. Much of the behaviour seen in sheep is governed by a fear instinct (common in all prey species), and they are dependent on their flock for safety and comfort. They become highly distressed when separated from their flock, their fear evident when they call out for other members of their group and they will strive to rejoin the group.

Fear and pain in sheep

Sheep have developed complex physiological ways to disguise pain and discomfort. A sheep with advanced footrot (a painful hoof condition) may have been suffering for a considerable time before showing any outward signs – such as limping – of being in pain. This is because, as prey animals, sheep must avoid being easily identified by predators as being weak and therefore an easy target. If you see a sheep in obvious pain, it is most likely that it has been suffering for some time and the pain has reached such a level that the animal is no longer able to mask its condition.

Treatment of sheep in the Middle East

For the same reasons, it is often difficult for us to identify fear or distress in sheep. Poor handling causes sheep to become highly stressed and puts them in a state of fear. Some of the footage taken during Animals Australia's investigations shows sheep being lifted by their wool, horns, legs, head and ears, all of which - whilst causing obvious physical pain - will also result in high fear and distress levels. Of particular concern is the routine leg-binding of sheep in the Middle East; rendering a prey animal – or any animal for that matter – helpless puts that animal in a state of distress. In the Animals Australia footage you will see sheep panting and defecating; putting these gentle animals in such a state of fear as to cause panic and defecation can not be defended.

Sheep Intelligence

Facial recognition and emotional intelligence

During a study conducted at the Babraham Institute, Cambridge, England, Dr Keith Kendrick and his team determined that sheep are likely to experience emotion and are almost certainly capable of conscious thought.

Dr Kendrick's conclusions are based on the ability of sheep to remember old faces, be it a member of the flock or a human. New studies have revealed that sheep can remember up to 50 sheep faces as well as familiar human faces, such as their carer.

LIVE ANIMAL EXPORT: INDEFENSIBLE.

They do this using a similar neural mechanism, and a similar part of the brain, to that of humans. Memories only start to fade after about two years of absence. One inference is that sheep are capable of conscious thought at some level, says Dr Kendrick.

“The way the sheep’s brain is organised suggests they must have some kind of emotional response to what they see in the world,” said Dr Kendrick. “It does beg the question that sheep must potentially be able to think about individuals that are absent from their environment,” he said.

“We [humans] are obviously capable of conscious perception of faces using this exact same system in the brain as is present in the sheep. Therefore, it would be surprising if they were not capable of some level of consciousness using that same system.”

Old faces

The Cambridge team made their discovery by presenting sheep with 25 pairs of similar faces. The animals were trained to associate each of the pair with a food reward, learning to recognise individual faces. The scientists then measured activity in regions of the sheep’s brain associated with visual recognition. As in humans, these reside in the temporal and frontal lobes of the brain, including a greater involvement of the right hemisphere. They found that sheep could remember 50 other sheep faces, even in profile.

The sheep were then shown two old faces - a sheep and a shepherd. Even after two years apart, the sheep responded to the faces, calling out in recognition. The specialised face-processing system in the sheep brain offers advantages for long-term recognition of many individuals that are similar to those for humans, say the Babraham researchers.

“In humans, analogous brain regions and neural circuits are activated equivalently when we see or form mental images of the faces of specific individuals. This suggests that sheep may be capable of using the same system to remember and respond emotionally to individuals in their absence,” said the team.

Source: BBC News Online, 7 December 2001

Sheep defeat cattle grids

An amazing story emerged from England in 2004, when locals reported that they had been outsmarted by local sheep, who were escaping their paddocks by rolling over cattle grids!

The sheep, from the county of Kirklees in West Yorkshire, perfected the art of rolling over the 3m wide cattle grid to get to tastier pastures – such as the village bowling green, cricket field and graveyard - on the other side. The same sheep have also been known to scale 1.5 metre walls.

Local councillor Dorothy Lindley says this new commando technique has led to havoc in local gardens and on the highway!

“They lie down on their side, or sometimes their back, and just roll over and over the grids until they are clear. I’ve seen them doing it. It is quite clever, but they are a big nuisance to villagers,” said Councillor Lindley.

Source: BBC News Online, 30 July 2004

LIVE ANIMAL EXPORT: INDEFENSIBLE.

Maze Test

Research conducted during 2005 at the F D McMaster Laboratory in Australia has shown that sheep can learn and remember tasks. Researchers developed a complex maze test to measure intelligence and learning in sheep, similar to those used for rats and mice. The time it initially takes an animal to rejoin its flock indicates smartness, while subsequent improvement in times over consecutive days of testing measures learning and memory.

“Using the maze, we have already shown that sheep have excellent spatial memory and are able to learn and improve their performance. And they can retain this information for a six-week period”, said researcher Dr Caroline Lee.

Source: scienceinpublic.com

The research outlined above reveals to us the complex social, intellectual, and emotional abilities of these animals.

Yet, every year, more than 4 million sheep are exported live to the Middle East, enduring long, uncomfortable journeys before being unloaded into a totally alien environment, many then being bound, transported and slaughtered whilst fully conscious.

We can only imagine the fear and distress experienced by these animals, and it is all done in the name of profit.