



## **Handling Public Concerns on the Use of Livestock in Museum Settings**

When interpreting agriculture, living history and agricultural museums choose to raise and use livestock for varying justifiable reasons:

- It is historically accurate and lends credibility to museums interpreting agriculture
- It helps visitors understand changes in agricultural techniques and production methods through demonstrable activities
- It connects visitors to their food sources in a tangible and visceral way that can impact their lifestyle choices and consumption habits
- It can provide valuable lessons on sustainability
- It can prompt thoughtful discussion on the pros and cons of modern industrialized food production
- It can promote understanding of global food issues

While most staff and volunteers of museums with livestock programs understand the vital role of livestock in the agricultural history and our continued human dependence on livestock as a food and power source, many members of the visiting public do not have this knowledge.

Livestock inhabit an odd place for many museum visitors who have no agricultural connections and who view animals anthropomorphically, as pets, as docile petting zoo inhabitants, or as wild and to be feared. These views often result in visitor reactions that range from emotional to strident and can lead to negative public discourse on the museum's practices.

These reactions can be upsetting to staff and volunteers and can escalate into a public relations nightmare that may result in the loss of all or part of a museum's livestock program. Given that, it is best for museums to be proactive and plan for how to deal with emotional or negative responses to their programming.

**Below are suggestions for museums with livestock programs to help avoid and/or handle negative public reactions:**

### **Preventative measures:**

- Be certain your livestock program supports the mission and interpretive goals of your museum and have a clear, prepared statement to that effect.
- Strive for transparency in your livestock program. Public institutions are often subject to open records legislation but private institutions should be willing to answer questions. Transparency often eliminates concerns for animal welfare before they escalate. If you are hesitant to release

information, ask yourself why. If there is a valid reason, ensure staff are able to articulate that reason to those requesting information.

- Ensure your livestock program is guided by clear and appropriate policies that are constructed with the assistance of animal care professionals that have knowledge of your program and are sensitive to your mission and goals. Working with animal care professionals from outside the museum lends credibility to the program.
- Have the museum's governing body review and approve policies and procedures regularly.
- Ensure work within the livestock program is dictated by clear and appropriate procedures that account for the safety and welfare of the animals, staff, and visitors and are regularly reviewed and updated.
- Provide adequate and regular training to all staff and volunteers on how they, and visitors, are to interact with livestock. Encourage/require staff and volunteers to learn about the issues of contemporary agriculture, including animal agriculture.
- Adhere to all federal, state, and local laws concerning the care of livestock and the best practices and standards as defined by industry organizations. Make this clear to visitors.
- Keep in regular contact with county and state boards of agriculture both to stay abreast of changing rules and regulations as well as maintaining a support base to deal with protests.
- Have a plan for how to deal with questions regarding animal welfare. Questions beyond a certain point, or people who are confrontational, should be referred to one or two point-people. This can defuse a situation as many people want to "speak with a manager" and it takes some burden off the shoulders of front-line staff.
- Think carefully about offering petting or naming opportunities if you also have animals that are working or may be processed as part of programming. This increases the likelihood that visitors will think of your livestock as pets and not part of the food chain. Clear programming objectives are necessary.
- Base your activities on solid historical research but be mindful that historic practices may not be agreeable to the general public. Weigh the pros and cons carefully before proceeding. Modifications can be made and then explained.
- Invite outside organizations to review your program on a regular basis. Extension agents, Board of Agriculture members, and veterinarians are good examples. Ask them to write letters of support and post these at your site or on your website.
- Keep track of the activities of animal rights organizations. Keeping abreast of the issues they are concerned with might help avoid future problems. Monitor their social media outlets for their activities. You might not be able to stop a protest at your facility but you may more prepared to answer questions from more casual visitors.
- Be aware and pay attention to how your facilities and water and food supplies appear. Visitors are often put off when these areas appear unkempt/inadequate/dirty. Periodically have a friendly member of the public do a walk through and give their impressions.
- Control pests and avoid infestations.

#### When Questions Arise:

- Stay calm. Most questions are simply out of curiosity and visitors are happy to learn more. Education is central to most museum programming.
- Refer visitors to a designated point-person (e.g., public information officer) if questioning escalates or becomes emotional.
- Be cooperative not defensive. Perhaps you do need to reevaluate your practices.

- Be forthcoming with information about the livestock program.
- If the issue becomes part of a larger public debate played out online, via social media, or local news agencies:
  - Ensure only designated staff speak with the public and news outlets or post/respond to social media
  - Consider inviting the media (in any form—could be a blogger) to the site for a tour or scheduling a public meeting
  - Elaborate on how the concerns raised are being taken seriously and project cooperativeness when possible
  - Refer to your policies and procedures and letters of support
  - Remind people that your practices are in line with all applicable rules and regulations.
  - Explain how the livestock program supports the mission of the museum, is historically accurate, and educates XXX number of people per year
  - Explain how programming at the site would suffer if the livestock program, or portions thereof, are eliminated
  - Remind people that many of the skills being preserved through historic livestock are or can be helpful to people in developing countries or those interested in sustainable agriculture (if rare breeds are being preserved mention that as well).
  - If a group/individual is protesting the use of museum livestock as food, remind people that they have that right but that not everyone agrees with that position. Elaborate on your facility's commitment to connecting people to agriculture and helping them understand their food sources so that they can make educated decisions.

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