

CALVING EASE

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Calf Care and Husbandry

Imagine being seated next to a city dweller on a plane. You nod to each other as you struggle to stow belongings in the overhead bins. Later perhaps you are asked, "What do you do?" "I raise calves," you reply. Since this draws a blank you try to explain.

Provide care to meet basic survival needs

Depending on how one defines jobs there are somewhere between thirty and fifty different jobs involved in meeting the basic survival needs of dairy replacement heifer calves. It won't work trying to describe all of these to your seatmate from Chicago or LA.

Maybe he/she would understand if you keep things rather general. "I feed them and take care of their housing. If they get sick I treat them to help them get better." That makes it sound super simple. But we all know that raising calves just doesn't work that way.

Maybe a compromise between too simple and too detailed is needed. So, you describe how they live in little condo's by themselves at first in order to prevent the spread of diseases. How this housing is kept clean and dry. You describe how your calves are fed twice a day. And, maybe you explain how calves start out consuming just milk and then grow into eating grain. How they mature into forage eating ruminants.

You part at the airport with a friendly wave. Reflecting on how you described your work, however, you have a sense of having missed something. What you told your seatmate was accurate. But, did you overlook an aspect of calf care that's really important? Don't you do more than just provide care that meets basic survival needs?

Calf care within the context of animal husbandry

As a job calf care can be done very mechanically. Not many interactions have to take place between the caregiver and the calves. Toss bedding into their pens. Put feed in front of them at regular intervals. That's it. But, we know that this mechanistic approach does not work well. Too many calves get sick, too many calves die.

Or, quality calf care can be done within the context of good animal husbandry. This implies frequent and regular interaction between the caregiver and the calves. In a world very sensitive to

biosecurity and disease transmission this interaction should not be interpreted as necessarily “touchy–feely” behavior. This person-animal relationship grows out of many small interactions. A calf responds to the familiar voice. Feeding time sounds bring the calf to the front of her pen or out of her hutch. We scold a calf when she gets her nose in the way as we try to feed milk.

All these small connections we make with calves provide us with a picture of what’s normal behavior. Very large calf enterprises try to retain this connection by scheduling the same persons to take care of certain calves day after day. This is in contrast to randomly assigning workers to any group of calves. This image of “normal” is an essential ingredient in providing quality calf care in the context of good animal husbandry.

Whether or not we respond to the opportunity daily care gives us to build connections with our calves depends heavily upon our attitudes about calves. Most workers that I have observed that have indifferent or negative feelings about calves do not seem to use these opportunities. The chances are there to build these “normal” pictures of calf behavior but these calfcare providers aren’t interested.

Those of us who genuinely like to care for calves take advantage of our work routines to “get to know” our charges. Not that we are saints. We all have busy days that stress us out. On those days we just manage to get calfcare done. Period.

But, in general, we talk to calves, we watch them, we mentally record behaviors that are a little out of line. We see calves as whole animals. We know what they should sound like, look like and how they should behave. Things that are out of line catch our attention. And we enjoy this human/animal interaction.

How would you have described to your urban seatmate calfcare within the context of good animal husbandry? Would it have been primarily in terms of behaviors or actions? Or, would it have been primarily in terms of attitude and feelings? It’s not as easy to talk about feelings as it is actions. I am convinced, however, that good animal husbandry practices in calf rearing are associated with positive attitudes about one’s calves. Much of the difference between average and excellent calfcare is consistent and uniform attention to details. Calfcare persons that have negative feelings about calves seldom have the motivation to attend to all these details.

And, even the calves have this figured out. They know the difference between positive caregivers and those that just plain don’t like working with calves.

Our challenge

To recruit, train and retain calfcare persons with positive attitudes toward calves that will provide excellent care within the context of good animal husbandry. That’s our challenge!

If you know of someone that doesn’t currently receive **Calving Ease** but would like to, tell them to **WRITE** to **Calving Ease**, 11047 River Road, Pavilion, NY 14525 or to **CALL** either 585-591-2660 (Attica Vet Assoc. office) or 585-343-8128 (Offhaus Farms Office) or **FAX** (585-591-2898) or **e-mail** sleadley@frontiernet.net or pams91@2ki.net. A limited number of back issues may be accessed on the Internet at www.calfnotes.com and clicking on the link, Calving Ease.