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The Danish Veterinary Association's position paper regarding the use of animals in different extents of nature conservation

The Danish Veterinary Association's (DVA) position paper intends to provide a basis of opinions to be expressed by representatives of the DVA, in public, on behalf of the association.

BACKGROUND

Nature conservation, rewilding and biodiversity have in recent years become a substantial part of the Danish environmental- and value policy and the number of Danish nature conservation and rewilding projects are increasing.

In February 2021, the Danish Government submitted a bill regarding the establishment of nature national parks. The bill included the possibility of exceptions from certain rules of the Animal Welfare Law and clarified the animal welfare-related risks associated with rewilding projects. Therefore, the DVA found it paramount to express its opinion regarding how animal welfare of fenced-in animals is accommodated as a part of nature conservation projects.

The purpose of rewilding projects is to create natural areas that are self-managing. Meaning that nature has the possibility of evolving without or with limited human interference and be able to accommodate a high degree of biodiversity.

Rewilding projects often include the release of hardy animal species, which can be wild animals such as bison and moose or domesticated animals such as horses or cattle. Regardless of whether the animal's origin is wild or domesticated, they are technically exposed to a life resembling that of wild animals. In Danish rewilding/nature conservation projects, the area wherein the animals are released will be fenced in, and supplementary feeding will be either ruled out or performed to a lesser extent. In some areas, the animals are exclusively used for summer grazing, while other areas provide the possibility of year-round grazing.

Rewilding is much debated due to the conflicting opinions regarding e.g., the extent of care and management of the herd.

With this policy paper, the DVA intends to express its opinions regarding the management of animals in rewilding projects in which animals are released in fenced areas and where the intention is to treat the animals as wild to the largest extent possible.

GENERAL OPINION OF THE DVA

There should be a distinction between:

1. Animals that are released into the wild
2. Animals that are released into enclosures or other geographically separate areas, regardless of the size of the area.

It is the opinion of the DVA that:

1. Animals that are released into the wild, *without fences*, should be treated as wild animals.
2. Animals that are released into enclosures in nature conservation projects should not be considered wild animals – they are cultivated animals in large fenced-in areas, which must, but is not limited to, include ownership responsibility and duty of care ensuring that the animals have freedom from unnecessary suffering cf. the Animal Welfare Law – on equal terms with other extensively or intensively managed herds.

SUPERVISION

The DVA's position is that:

- The frequency of supervision for cattle should be regular, but at least once a day in high-risk periods (including, but not limited to calving- and lemming season, high temperature (over 20 degrees Celsius), in periods of heavy rain along with the winter months) to avoid violation of the Animal Welfare Law.
- Horses should be supervised daily.
- A supervising veterinarian should evaluate the condition of the fenced-in animals through objective criteria multiple times a year.
- The possibility of closer inspection and handling of the animals e.g., by mobile pounds must be available.

Reference is also made to the position of the [Veterinary Health Council](#) regarding animals kept outdoors in the winter months (Joint position with the Animal Welfare Council of the 8th of November 2012) supplemented by the position of the 15th of June 2018 regarding outdoor animal husbandry along with the feeding of these animals.

FEEDING, MINERAL SUPPLEMENT AND ACCESS TO WATER

The DVA's position is that:

- Fenced-in animals should be offered supply feeding in times of poor natural food supply.
- The animals should have the possibility of mineral supplements such as a saltlick. This is because mineral deficiency is a possible side effect of animals not being able to choose feeding grounds freely.
- The animals should always have easy access to fresh water also in both dry and freezing seasons.

AREA REQUIREMENTS

The areas must be of such nature that they are appropriate for the animal population which is intended for release. It must be ensured that the animals are not exposed to unnecessary suffering due to the shortcomings of the area. It is essential that the animals can seek shelter in harsh weather and that they have access to lie down in a dry spot.

There should be facilities for capturing the animals so that ear tags can be applied and other treatments can be done without harming neither animals nor humans.

Parasite load in animals in fenced areas can pose a serious welfare problem and occurs regularly also in extensive herds of animals. There should be a plan to prevent and deal with

this parasitic risk, which may, but is not limited to, include requirements for the area (e.g., for the population density). Nature conservation projects must seek veterinary expertise to ensure they have the necessary counselling on management and prevention of parasite problems.

WHICH ANIMALS SHOULD BE RELEASED

The Danish Veterinary Association believes that animals must be suitable for Danish climatic conditions, e.g., hardy Danish-bred sheep, cattle and horse breeds would be suitable. If import animals are chosen for release, special attention should be paid to the fact that this may involve a special risk of introducing new viral diseases, zoonoses and other pathogens, which could be transmitted to the wild fauna.

The DVA believe that the release of wild boar poses a major risk due to the possibility of outbreaks of serious infectious diseases (especially African swine fever). Therefore, special precautions should be taken for example, in the form of an authorization, where particularly the risk of access for humans, the indirect interaction between animals and humans, and human remains are considered.

PLAN FOR THE TRANSITION PERIOD

A well-established transition period for newly released animals must be in place – this should include intensified supervision of their well-being, and, if necessary, supplementary feeding in the transition period along with the potential removal of weak animals.

ACTION PLANS

It is the opinion of the DVA that when applying for nature conservation projects, wherein animals are released there should be a management plan and a project plan to ensure that the Animal Welfare Law is upheld.

These should include: Details regarding supervision, removal of diseased animals, marking of animals, handling of sick and injured animals along with instructions of how much body condition score may decrease before culling or supplementary feeding should occur.

Furthermore, there should be an action plan for when and under which criteria the population should be reduced in conjunction with concise criteria for when animals should be euthanized. Additionally, it is the opinion of the DVA that the creation of action plans for the treatment and prevention of the spread of disease including notifiable- or parasitic diseases is essential.

REGISTRATION AND EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

It is the opinion of the DVA that the following criteria must be met:

- Nature conservation projects should be approved and registered
- The supervisors must be well-educated in the supervision and evaluation of animals contained in these conditions to ensure they are handled correctly and not subject to unnecessary suffering. A course with accompanying educational material should be created with this purpose in mind.
- A logbook must be kept by the supervisors to monitor the animals' condition and to create relevant action plans.

NEED FOR RESEARCH

To benefit ongoing and future projects, the DVA suggests that:

- Resources should be allocated to research that enables evidence-based management of nature conservation projects in the future. It could include the development of the herd, difficulties concerning animal welfare, the area's development and suitability, the animals' suitability including the animals' health (micro minerals e.g.)
- The individual nature conservation projects get a resource allocation to maintain a certain level of data collection for the sake of following the development of certain parameters prospectively.

COMMUNICATION PLAN

It is the opinion of the DVA that a communication plan for visitors and residents, including reporting of alarming observations as well as the prevention of conflicts between humans and animals, should be created. There should be an increased focus on making sure that visitors know the risks of bringing dogs in areas with loose animals and how to prevent dangerous situations.

FUTURE INITIATIVES

1. Dialogue with relevant stakeholders including biologists.
2. Courses to practising veterinarians who work with rewilding and nature conservation projects.
3. The creation of informational material for veterinarians and other stakeholders.