

Study shows how cows reveal feelings using their ears

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A new study exploring how to measure emotions in cows has suggested that it may be possible to tell how a cow is feeling from the position of their ears, and also that like dogs, cats and many of our pets they display visible and recognisable signs of pleasure at being stroked.

A study of 13 [cows](#) by scientists at leading [animal welfare](#) charity World Animal Protection, published in this month's *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, showed that when they were being stroked for five minutes, an experience that put the cows into a calm and relaxed state, the cows performed either a backward ear posture, or a hanging ear posture, where the ear fell loosely, perpendicular to the head. This contrasted with the more usual position of the ear before and after stroking of either upright or forwards.

Previous studies have suggested that ear position may provide clues to how sheep and pigs are feeling but this study is the first to look at whether cows display similar traits.

World Animal Protection's Sentience Manager, Helen Proctor, who co-authored the study said: "Although these results need further validation using different stimuli, they do indicate that the use of ear postures may provide a quick, non-invasive and low-cost measure to assess the [emotional state](#) of [dairy cows](#)."

"Because emotions are defined as short lasting, it is possible that ear postures may provide both an immediate indicator of the cow's

emotional state and may also be indicative of a longer lasting mood state. Understanding animal emotions is crucial if we are to improve animal welfare as emotions play a major role in an animal's mental well-being. Research into positive emotions must therefore continue, and reliable indicators of [positive emotions](#) need to be developed and applied in practice so that animal welfare can continue to improve."

The study undertook nearly 400 observations of the 13 cows using stroking on their head, neck and withers as a positive stimulus. The ear positions most prevalent when the cow was not being stroked (an upright or forward ear posture) were markedly different to those adopted when the positive stimulus of stroking was being undertaken.

The study was carried out at Bolton's Park Farm, which is part of the Royal Veterinary College, Potters Bar.

This work is part of many studies carried out by World Animal Protection as animal sentience is of growing international concern and interest across many disciplines and sectors. The scientific community's understanding of sentience is crucial in affecting how [animals](#) are treated, both in work and everyday lives.

The study is also hoped to be of use when working with the dairy industry in their programmes and understanding of their cows. World Animal Protection UK has a long running campaign to address the problem of a trend towards intensive dairy farming and is raising awareness of the benefits and needs for pasture based farming, both for the animals and for the failing industry, which is currently in crisis.

More information: "Can ear postures reliably measure the positive emotional state of cows?" *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2014.09.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2014.09.015)

Provided by World Animal Protection

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