

Understanding Bovine Behavior for Safe Handling

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Abstract

Understanding behavioral principles in cattle makes working with them safer and more enjoyable. Reading a cow's body language helps indicate how much stress the cow is feeling, and can give clues as to her general health. One should be very careful around cows in a high level of stress as they may become aggressive. Cattle tend to be more agitated around strangers or people with whom they associate being stressed. Using the basic principles of flight zone and point of balance will facilitate moving groups of cattle quickly and calmly. Cows with new calves may become aggressive when protecting their calves. If a cow shows signs of agitation such as vocalization, pacing, pawing, or head-shaking, entering her flight zone may cause her to attack. Agitated or defensive cows can be dangerous and should be avoided. Sick dairy cows may develop ketosis, which can affect their temperament, making a previously docile animal behave in an agitated or even aggressive way. Bulls must always be handled carefully, particularly dairy breed bulls. A bull that shows a broadside threat to humans should be culled at once. Even if a bull calf is reared properly with other cattle, an adult bull is usually safer if he spends most of his adult life penned with other animals.

Résumé

Une compréhension des principes régissant le comportement des bovins rend le travail avec eux plus sécuritaire et plus plaisant. Décoder le langage corporel des vaches aide à évaluer le stress subi par une vache et peut fournir des indices concernant sa santé en général. Il faut être prudent lorsque les vaches sont stressées car elles peuvent devenir agressives. Les bovins ont tendance à être plus agités en présence d'étrangers ou de personnes qu'ils associent avec un stress. L'utilisation des principes de la zone de fuite et du point de balance facilitera le déplacement des groupes de bovins plus rapidement et plus calmement. Les vaches avec des nouveau-nés peuvent devenir agressives lorsqu'elles défendent leurs veaux. Si une vache montre des signes d'agitation, incluant la vocalisation, l'arpentage, le tapement du sol ou le hochement de tête, la vache peut attaquer si on entre dans sa zone de fuite. Les vaches agitées ou sur la défensive peuvent être dangereuses et devraient être évitées. Les vaches

laitières malades peuvent développer l'acétonémie, ce qui peut affecter leur tempérament de sorte qu'une vache qui était docile auparavant peut devenir agitée ou même agressive. Les taureaux doivent toujours être traités avec prudence surtout les taureaux de race laitière. Un taureau qui adopte une posture latérale menaçante envers les humains devrait être éliminé tout de suite. Même lorsqu'un veau mâle est élevé correctement avec d'autres bovins, un taureau adulte est plus en sécurité lorsqu'il passe la plus grande partie de sa vie adulte en enclos avec d'autres animaux.

Introduction

Understanding behavioral principles enhances interaction with any species, including other humans! In the case of cattle, which typically weigh well over 1000 pounds at maturity, understanding their behavior makes working with them easier, safer and more enjoyable for both species.

Understanding Bovine Behavior

One of the most basic and effective strategies for working with individual cows is to ensure that the cow can see you as you approach her. Cows have a blind spot directly behind them, much like a truck. Approaching a cow in her blind spot may cause her to become startled when she is touched or becomes aware of the person nearby. To prevent the cow being startled and reacting in an unsafe way such as bolting or kicking, she should always see a handler approaching. The cow will remain calmer and easier to work with if she is also able to see other cows nearby. Reading the cow's body language will help indicate how much stress the cow is feeling and how much care should be taken in approaching her. The tail of a relaxed cow will hang loosely, away from her body. A more nervous cow will tuck her tail up next to her body. Especially tense animals may "wring" the tail, curling and flipping it.

The cow can also give you clues as to her general health using body language. A healthy, relaxed cow that is not in pain will frequently stretch upon arising, as will healthy calves. Animals in pain will tend to have a hump in their back and may hold the tail away from their body.

Cows may also display stress by urinating and defecating. A high level of stress and agitation are dis-

played as bellowing, butting, kicking and fence-walking. One should be very careful around cows in a high level of stress, as they may become aggressive. Stress may be minimized by taking care not to isolate a cow away from other cows and by minimizing startling or loud noises, including yelling. Cattle tend to be more agitated around strangers or people with whom they associate being stressed.

Cows are individuals; like people, some will remain relatively calm and some will become quite agitated under the same circumstances. The behavior of the individual cow is dictated by genetics, individual variation and the cow's experience. Cows that are handled gently tend to be gentler cows than those that are handled roughly.

Cattle are frequently moved in groups. Keeping the following basic principles in mind when moving groups of cattle will facilitate the arrival of humans and bovines at their destination quickly and calmly.

1) Flight zone: this is the cow's personal space. Entering a cow's flight zone will cause the cow to move away from the handler. The flight zone tends to be larger in beef cattle than in dairy cattle.

2) Point of balance: in cattle, the shoulder is the point of balance. Entering the cow's flight zone from behind the shoulder will cause the cow to go forward, while entering the flight zone from in front of the shoulder will cause the animal to turn away.

When cattle are grouped or lined up (in a chute or otherwise), walking through their flight zone in a nose-to-tail direction will cause each animal to step forward as the person passes their point of balance (shoulder).

It is important to remember to release flight zone pressure when the cattle begin to move. Step towards the cattle until you enter their flight zone and they begin to move, then stop moving towards them. By allowing the cattle to retreat after you enter their flight zone, they may be moved in a calm fashion, with minimal or

no running. Running tends to excite the animals and make them more difficult to handle. Not putting undue pressure on the flight zone of the cattle also reduces the likelihood of a handler being kicked!

Cattle may become aggressive when they feel threatened or become very stressed. Cows with new calves may become aggressive in their protection of the calf. If a cow shows signs of agitation such as vocalization, pacing, pawing, or head-shaking, entering her flight zone may cause her to attack. Agitated or defensive cows can be dangerous and should be avoided. Sick dairy cows, especially those with a displaced abomasum, may develop ketosis, a condition of abnormal metabolites in the blood. This condition can affect the temperament of the cow, making a previously docile animal behave in an agitated or even aggressive way. Such animals should be handled with caution.

Bulls must always be handled carefully, particularly dairy breed bulls. From www.grandin.com, the website of animal behaviorist Dr. Temple Grandin: "A bull will perform a broadside threat prior to attack. He will stand sideways so the person or other bull can see how big and powerful he is. Sometimes a person can make a bull back off by responding with the human variation of a broadside threat which for people is a frontal stance. Alternatively, the person may just back slowly away from the bull. NEVER RUN away and do not turn your back on a bull.

In dairies where bulls run loose in the cow pens, managers should be trained to notice aggressive postures. The bull should just move away along with other cows when the milkers approach. A bull that does a broadside threat to milkers should be culled. Even if a bull calf is reared properly with other cattle, an adult bull is usually safer if he spends most of his adult life penned with other animals. Bulls that are penned alone for long periods of time may be more likely to attack people."