

# **‘I DON’T WANT TO THINK ABOUT IT’ CONCERNS ABOUT SHEEP AND BEEF CATTLE TRANSPORTATION AND SLAUGHTER AMONGST AUSTRALIAN MEAT CONSUMERS**

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**Abstract** – Meat consumers are increasingly interested in livestock production practices. There is tension between the desire to consume meat and wanting to make ‘ethical’ food choices. In 2015 and 2016, sixty-six meat consumers from Australia participated in focus groups and interviews, structured around topics such as on-farm welfare and meat purchasing decisions. While exploring how Australian meat consumers conceptualise animal welfare, the transportation and slaughter of sheep and beef cattle were highlighted as key areas of concern, including road transport and shipping conditions related to live export. Many participants held strong, negative opinions about the conditions under which Australian livestock are slaughtered overseas.

**Key Words** – Consumer Attitudes, Animal Welfare, Transport

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Livestock production is often in the spotlight in association with farm animal welfare. Population growth, increasing urbanisation, growing disposable incomes, and rising global meat consumption are increasing demand for animal protein, which has raised concerns about the environmental, public health and ethical implications of animal production. Consumers in the US [1,2], Europe [3], and Australia [4] are scrutinising production methods and their impacts on the environment and animal welfare. The results presented in this paper are part of a larger project which documents and analyses consumers’ views on sheep and beef cattle animal welfare in Australia. During analysis, it was evident that meat consumers are particularly concerned about the transportation and slaughter of sheep and beef cattle.

## **II. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Sixty-six meat consumers from across Australia participated in focus groups and interviews using qualitative methods [5]. Participants were recruited through community announcements, newsletters, and social media. Focus groups lasted for approximately an hour using semi-scripted, open-ended prompts allowing participants to explore the reasoning underlying their responses, and connect them to their personal experiences and broader social/ethical issues. Interviews (based on a modified shorter script) were conducted in shopping centres to ensure participation of those from diverse ethnicities and lower incomes. Interviews and focus groups were structured around a series of topics such as on-farm welfare and meat purchasing decisions. Sessions were digitally recorded, transcribed, de-identified, and coded using “open-coding” methods [6].

## **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

When asked about their opinions of the slaughter process, most participants said they were happy not knowing what happens, or admitted to having limited knowledge about the process, often suggesting that they simply trust the processes in Australia. Some participants acknowledged the necessity of the process. Similar to Spooner et al.’s study [7], our participants emphasized that slaughter can be stressful for the farmer, slaughter-men, and the animal. Participants also suggested that slaughter should be done as quickly and humanely as possible so the animal does not suffer, and demonstrated some understanding about the impacts that pre-slaughter stress can have on product quality:

There were concerns about animals being transported to slaughter in trucks: although Australian transportation standards call for animals to be tightly packed to limit movement to minimize bruising, injury, and truck roll-over, participants believed that the animals did not like being tightly packed. Some participants talked about the long distances that animals had to travel and the unnecessary stress caused.

Participants' concerns about live export were notable. In 2014-15, Australia exported 2.18 million head of sheep and 1.38 million head of cattle [8], generating over \$800 million annually [9]. Many participants believed the live export industry to be unnecessary, noting disgust with the conditions to which animals are subjected. Participants were worried about animals being 'crammed' onto ships and transported long distances. They also expressed concerns about certain destinations, with locales with large Muslim populations (e.g., Indonesia and the Middle East) generating the greatest amounts of concern, and indicated that they believed animal welfare standards overseas are nowhere near as good as in Australia.

Participants suggested that stunning prior to slaughter was important for animal welfare, and raised concerns about Halal slaughter, often associating the process with poor animal welfare as they believed pre-slaughter stunning was not used (in fact there are only a few abattoirs in Australia exempt from using pre-slaughter stunning [10]). Concerns about Halal slaughter were closely associated with overseas export, although pre-slaughter stunning is encouraged for all who import Australian livestock [11].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Australian meat consumers have many concerns about the transport of animals and live export. However, considerable amounts of trust still remain in the domestic processing sector. Understanding what consumers think about farm animal welfare at each stage of the production system is key to engaging consumers, producers, retailers, and processors in discussions about how to develop animal products which are safe, affordable, and sustainably- and humanely-produced.

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