

The Status of Animals in Denmark

In the past year, Denmark has been in the spotlight for its conflicting policies on animal rights and welfare.

First, Denmark attracted global attention from animal rights activists and worldwide criticism when the Copenhagen Zoo euthanized a healthy two year-old giraffe named Marius.¹ The scientific director of the Copenhagen Zoo, Bengt Holst, euthanized the giraffe because “this giraffe’s genes are well represented in the breeding programme and as there is no place for the giraffe in the Zoo’s giraffe herd, the European Breeding Programme for Giraffes has agreed that Copenhagen Zoo euthanize the giraffe.” The Zoo received several public and private offers to purchase the giraffe, but declined, afraid transferring the giraffe put it at risk of spending “the next 20 years suffering.”² After Marcus was euthanized, zoo scientists performed a public autopsy for educational purposes and later fed parts of the giraffe to the lions.

Second, and in contrast to euthanizing a healthy animal, Denmark has taken the position that animal rights have precedence over religious freedom. In April, Denmark signed legislation mandating that all food animals must be stunned before being slaughtered.³ The new rule bans ritual slaughter methods required by both Muslim and Jewish tradition, on the grounds that such methods are inhumane. According to both traditions, animals must be conscious when killed in order to be considered kosher (Jewish law) or halal (Islamic law). Denmark’s Agriculture and Food Minister has publicly stated, “...animal rights come before religion.” Muslim and Jewish leaders argued that there is scientific evidence to suggest that ritual slaughter can be just as humane as conventional slaughter. The Agriculture and Food Minister has invited local leaders to submit proof of their claim. The Danish Halal and Jewish Congregation in Copenhagen are circulating a petition to retract the ban on ritual slaughter regardless of whether the government accepts that the kosher and halal methods are humane. They reject the idea animal rights at stake should take precedence over religious rights.

Citizens of Denmark have used social media to voice their opinions about the conflicting status given to animals in Denmark. One Twitter user wrote, “In Denmark butchering a healthy giraffe in front of kids is cool but a kosher/halal chicken is illegal.”⁴

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference in moral status between zoo animals and animals raised for consumption?
2. Is it justifiable to promote non-human animal welfare at the expense of certain religious practices?
3. Should non-human animals be afforded the consideration and moral status of humans?

¹ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/02/10/274750447/copenhagen-zoos-scientific-director-defends-killing-giraffe>

² <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/02/10/274750447/copenhagen-zoos-scientific-director-defends-killing-giraffe>

³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/04/09/291887381/banning-traditional-animal-slaughter-denmark-stokes-religious-ire>

⁴ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/denmark-bans-halal-and-kosher-slaughter-as-minister-says-animal-rights-come-before-religion-9135580.html>

