

by Ruth Turtle

Do the Public Have a Fair Perception of Cows?



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Cows. Gentle giants. Intelligent creatures. Well, at least that's my initial thoughts. But for many, it couldn't be further from theirs. Big, fat, stupid milk-making methane machines. Does that sound more like it to you? Nowadays, people are misjudging bovines and travelling further from the truth about them for many reasons, one being stereotypes.

First of all, I have grown up on a farm with cows my entire life and this have allowed me to gain an understanding of just how wonderful these animals are. They are so much more than just big, dirty animals. If people had even just a slightly better understanding of the truth about these creatures, it would maybe help to eradicate the negative feelings that they have towards them.

To start, cows are blamed for a lot of things. But undoubtedly, the largest and most significant accusation they receive is for causing climate change. Methane is a greenhouse gas produced by cows. 23 times more efficient at trapping heat than carbon dioxide, it lasts in the atmosphere for about 12 years before it breaks down, compared to carbon dioxide which takes roughly 200 years before it decomposes. Scientists estimate that a cow produces approximately 100kg of methane per year, the equivalent of 2,300kg of carbon dioxide. These emissions are the cause of 14.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions and 40% of global methane emissions. The average human, on the other hand, produces about 0.015kg (15 grams) of methane per year but has a carbon footprint of around 4,000kg per annum. With between 1 and 1.5 billion bovines burping up the gas every day, they would produce roughly the equivalent of 3,450,000,000,000kg of CO₂. Human beings, with a global population of over 8.1 billion annually create an average worldwide carbon footprint of 32,400,000,000,000kg of the heat holding gas. Methane has a strong but short-lived impact on climate change whereas carbon dioxide has a weaker but longer-lasting effect on the planet. Bovines do not purposely try to increase the rate of climate change though – they don't even realise that they are doing it – and humans are certainly not innocent either! Cows naturally produce a lot of this heat trapping gas but a significant increase in methane emissions over the past few centuries is all down to humans. We have had to increase the number of cows we farm to feed the growing world population, so it is not their fault but ours.

All cows are black and white and exactly the same. Have you ever thought that when you have passed a field of grazing dairy cows? Well, I can assure you that that is completely false. Cows come in many different shapes, sizes and colours which makes them unique. They definitely all have a personality of their own too. Every human's personality is individual, and that's the same for dogs. And cats. And any other animal. So why should we think that for cows, each one is boringly identical? After I have been caring for a new group of calves for only a few days, each animal's personality becomes clearer, and their characters start to shine – I am then able to identify the friendly one, the greedy one, the quiet one, the curious one and the escapee! Each animal is individual and special. One of its kind.

Another fact that I can confidently state is that cattle are not stupid. They are actually very intelligent. Although they don't reach the top spots when placing animals by their intelligence levels, it doesn't mean they are brainless. Cattle may not be knowledgeable in the same way as humans are, but they display their intelligence in other forms. They show many cognitive skills, such as learning how to push the end of a pipe so that it will release more water for them to drink. They can even understand not just other cattle's emotions, but ours too! On top of being intelligent, they are very curious and will take any opportunity to discover new environments or approach unfamiliar objects that they find. They will lick, sniff and touch these unfamiliar items until they are sure it is safe and not a threat, figuring it out themselves.

From luxurious ice creams to tender steaks, smooth chocolate milkshakes to your leather handbag, we have lots to thank cows for. Since first being domesticated almost 10,000 years ago, cattle have played a major role in society by providing valuable resources for us. No matter the age, they should all be treated with the deepest respect. Instead of thought of with a negative perspective, cows should be commended on the amazing animals they are – and that is why we should open our eyes to the truth and strongly believe that bovines are brilliant.