

Animal care advocate

Widely respected for her groundbreaking research on animal behavior, Dr. Temple Grandin helped lay a foundation for humane livestock handling at Callicrate Cattle Company by providing training and consulting on facility design more than two decades ago. Now in her late 70s, the revered Colorado State University professor continues to travel the country advocating for improved animal welfare. While technology has changed, the basics of good handling she pioneered over her 50-year career still apply. "AI is not going to replace stockmanship," she said in a recent interview. Here's more from that conversation.



YOU'VE CONSULTED WITH THE LIVESTOCK INDUSTRY FOR MANY YEARS. HOW HAS YOUR MESSAGE BEEN RECEIVED? ARE STANDARDS AND AWARENESS IMPROVING?

Cattle handling in the 1970s was terrible, and that's a thing that has really improved. When I first started in the '70s, only ten percent of people with cattle were even thinking about doing it right. Now I would say it's more like 80 percent.

WHAT ROLE DID CONSUMER DEMAND PLAY? IT WASN'T REALLY A FACTOR AT FIRST, RIGHT?

No, it didn't change because of consumers. It changed because in the beginning I emphasized economic benefits such as safety, weight gain, better conception rates on artificial insemination and better meat quality. I used those economic things to push good cattle handling. Now you have all kinds of seminars in cattle handling. When I first started none of that existed.



SO WHAT DO YOU SEE FOR THE FUTURE OF HUMANELY RAISED MEAT PRODUCTS?

I think you're going to end up having a two-tiered market. You'll have your specialty niches, which will probably be more expensive, and then you'll have large scale commercial. The problem with large scale commercial is when it breaks, you're in trouble. If it's big, it's fragile. Now it is cheaper, simply because of the economics of the feed. I remember when the big pig industry took off and it was like they had some secret proprietary thing. I'll tell you what it was. Trains unloading at a giant feed mill. You could see them from the road. As a feedlot, you can save 30 percent or more when you buy train cars of grain rather than buying it down at the local feed store.

ARE YOU SAYING THE COMPANIES THAT BECAME DOMINANT IN THE MARKET WERE PRETENDING TO HAVE SOMETHING PROPRIETARY?

Well, people thought it was. But it wasn't. The thing was the small guy couldn't compete on the feed costs. When you buy trainloads of grain you've got economies of scale there. But if it breaks, you're in trouble. Look at what happened during Covid. When two big plants shut down — I did a paper on this — you had to dispose of 100,000 head of pigs. They got thrown away because you couldn't process them. That's totally terrible. With a more distributed supply chain, it's more expensive, but it's also more robust. It doesn't break as easily.

IS THE SOLUTION TO KNOW YOUR RANCHER?

I think there will be a big market for ranch-to-retail, and we need more small slaughter establishments. And one of the ways to get started are these modular systems [Callicrate Cattle Co was a leader in installing and designing these units.] Legally they're trailers and that solves a lot of the regulatory issues. Even if you park them and they never move, legally they're trailers. So you can get started with a small plant much cheaper with these modular units than you can with bricks-and-mortar.

WHAT WELFARE ISSUES ARE YOU MOST CONCERNED ABOUT RIGHT NOW?

Cattle handling has really gotten better, but I'm concerned about breeding. We're breeding for rapid weight gain and a few specific meat traits, but we're getting crooked feet in cattle, we're getting more congestive heart failure. I'm equally critical of pet breeding. We're breeding cats with joints that break, pugs that can't breathe, and some of these other extreme-type things. These problems happen because they've crept up slowly. I call that bad becoming normal. When it creeps up slowly, people don't realize it's happening until it gets really serious.

Dr. Grandin is the author of more than 20 books, including animal welfare classics like *Animals Make Us Human* and *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*.