

A close-up photograph of a brown rat standing in shallow water on a sandy beach. The rat is facing right, with its head lowered towards the water. The background is a soft-focus view of the beach and ocean. The text is overlaid on the image.

COUNCIL ON ANIMAL AFFAIRS

SHINING A LIGHT  
ON THE KILLING OF  
ANIMALS

SHIFTING VIEWS, CHANGING DISCUSSIONS

**SUMMARY**

## The purpose and activities of the Council

The Council on Animal Affairs (Raad voor Dierenaangelegenheden, RDA) is an independent council of experts, which advises the Minister for Agriculture, Nature and Food quality of the Netherlands. This advice is submitted on request and by the Council's own initiative regarding complex, multidisciplinary issues relating to animal health and welfare. The RDA currently comprises some forty experts with a wide range of backgrounds and expertise, who serve on the Council in a personal capacity, independently and without any outside influence.

The Council on Animal Affairs considers issues across the entire spectrum of animal policy: on captive ("domesticated") and non-captive ("wild") animals, smallholding, or hobby farm animals, companion animals (pets), commercially raised animals and laboratory animals.

The Council records the conclusions of its deliberations in opinions. These documents provide an overview of the scientific and societal background to various issues, and include recommendations on policy options and avenues for resolving potential problems. Consensus is not a requirement for the inclusion of opinions; an opinion may contain views held by a minority of Council members.

## Foreword

More and more Dutch people believe that animals have the right to live with dignity and do not want to see animals suffer. Our relationship with animals is changing, as we saw in the Council for Animal Affairs (RDA) report 'The State of the Animal in the Netherlands' (2019). We once considered humans to be rulers over animals; now, we increasingly see animals as partners.

How does that relate to the killing of animals? In the past, we considered this issue primarily from the perspective of human interests. If we put the interests and welfare of animals first, where will conflicts arise? Can we make things better for animals?

In the advisory report 'Shining a light on the killing of animals', we explored five reasons for killing animals. In each case, we described the issues and presented specific conclusions and recommendations.

We also formulated a number of general recommendations that were relevant to all of the situations we explored. Our most important recommendation

is that the killing of animals should never be taken for granted. It demands attention and careful consideration. This is a matter that involves everyone: public authorities, sector parties, academics and citizens. The RDA hopes to provide tools for the debate.

This public summary provides a brief overview of the report. The full version of the advisory report 'Shining a light on the killing of animals' is available on the RDA's website.

The Hague, May 2022



Jan Staman, voorzitter



Marc Schakenraad, secretaris

COUNCIL ON ANIMAL AFFAIRS

# SHINING A LIGHT ON THE KILLING OF ANIMALS

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SUMMARY



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## Interview with forum chair Franck Meijboom

# ‘Do we show sufficient respect for the killing of animals?’

People coexist with animals in different ways. In these diverse situations, there are various reasons for killing animals. That distinction creates tension from different perspectives within what is already an uncomfortable subject. The RDA hopes that this advisory report will make it easier to discuss this subject and show ways in which animal welfare can be improved in relation to killing.

### Handling complexity

The Council set out to explore the full breadth of the theme ‘killing animals’, as Franck Meijboom, associate professor of Ethics at Utrecht University, explains. He chaired the RDA forum that prepared this advisory report. “We explored a number of different reasons for killing, to get a handle on the diversity and complexity of the subject. How do different opinions and practices co-exist, and are there any inconsistencies? What can the people involved in different situations learn from each other?” The RDA’s advisory reports are usually developed by a single forum. In this case, the subject was so broad that the decision was made to form a small core group and supplement it with working groups, with each investigating a different sub-topic. As the forum chair explained, “We were able to get a clear picture of the scale and diversity of the subject and identify the issues for each of the different reasons.”

### No one-size-fits-all solutions

Did this process produce clear conclusions? “We were never under the illusion that we could present one-size-fits-all solutions,” says Meijboom. “The differences were just too big.” He explains that this was partly to do with the purpose of killing in the various situations. “For example, with animals that are causing a nuisance, you could take more preventative meas-



Photograph: Paul Voorham Fotografie

Forum chair Franck Meijboom

ures so that there aren’t as many animals that you have to kill. That doesn’t apply for animals that we kill for human use, because in that case, killing is an intrinsic goal. With nuisance control, it’s a question of execution; with production animals or laboratory animals, it’s a discussion about purpose.”

In addition, the decision-making and execution can vary significantly between situations in which the goal is the same. “You can’t compare day-old male chicks in the laying poultry sector with animals that don’t fit into a zoo’s breeding programme. In both cases, they are surplus animals, but the situations and the underlying goals are very different.”

### Part of a system

Meijboom points out that, in many cases, the practice of killing arose as part of a system. “The systems in which we deal with animals were developed for a specific purpose. As these systems developed, we never consciously thought about killing; it was just the final stage of the process. The fact that, when

we breed laying hens, we are left with unusable male chicks, we see as a kind of ‘collateral damage’. You see something similar with companion animals. When you buy a dog, you don’t think about the fact that, in 14 or 15 years’ time, it will get sick and might have to be put down.” As Meijboom says, these examples illustrate how complex and varied this subject is. “Both situations are about the killing of animals, but the rationale is very different. It’s no wonder that the practice of killing differs so significantly across the situations we investigated. It forces us to reflect: the way in which we kill shows how we treat animals.”

### **The first step is prevention**

In spite of the wide variety, the advisory report does highlight a number of common threads. These are reflected in four general recommendations. “The first step is to aim for prevention. In all situations, we’re saying: aim for less. Look into prevention options and alternative solutions. Killing in itself is seldom or never in the animal’s interest. As the RDA, we think the mindset should be: killing is a big deal, so we should think carefully about whether there is another way.”

“In a number of cases, such as meat production or with certain types of animal testing, the killing of animals is a goal in itself. You can only prevent that killing by calling the entire system into question. Such a discussion is part of this topic but falls outside the scope of this advisory report.”

### **Clear assessment frameworks**

Meijboom explains the second recommendation. “We believe that all factors must be carefully considered before making a decision to kill animals. What are the consequences for the animals in question, and what other interests are at play? The RDA thinks that this needs to be made as easy as possible for people in practice by providing clear assessment frameworks.”

### **Look at things from the animal’s perspective**

The third recommendation is: think about the issue more

in terms of animal welfare. “Instead of looking at unwanted animals simply as ‘collateral damage’, see them as living creatures with intrinsic value. This applies not only to large systems in which animals are marginalised, but also to our relationships with pets – for example, when an owner allows their dog or cat to suffer unnecessarily because they can’t bring themselves to say goodbye. That is also an issue of welfare.”

Training and the provision of information are important. “If you kill animals for a living, you ought to know what you’re doing. And in terms of companion animals, we would say: make sure people realise what they’re getting themselves into when they take responsibility for an animal.”

### **Choose to carry out the killing responsibly**

The final recommendation is to make sure killing is carried out responsibly. “Once you have followed the steps from the other three recommendations, choose a responsible way of carrying out the action of killing, using a method that has as little impact as possible on the welfare of the animal and is performed by competent people.”

### **‘No, unless’ attitude**

Forum chair Meijboom sums up the recommendations as showing a ‘no, unless’ attitude. He thinks they are a good reflection of what is happening in society. “We saw that already in our study ‘The State of the Animal in the Netherlands’ in 2019: the way in which we view animals has changed. It is no coincidence that a recognition of the intrinsic value of animals has been enshrined in law. We come back to that in this advisory report, from the perspective of a wide range of situations. Instead of looking at animals as things, see them as creatures with their own value. That is why, with regard to the killing of animals, we say: do not just think about preventing suffering, and ask yourself: are we showing sufficient respect; and when we kill animals, what other purpose are we weighing it up against?”

# Breathing life into a debate about

Killing is part of our dealings with animals. How can we put animal welfare at the heart of conversations on this uncomfortable subject?



Different situations raise specific questions

## 1 Nuisance

Animals that cause nuisance to people.

Is killing the only solution, or is prevention possible?

## 2 Suffering

Animals that suffer unbearably without prospect of improvement.

What constitutes suffering, and when should an animal be killed?

## 3 Unwanted

Animals that do not fit in the system devised for them by humans.

Is killing acceptable, or are there other solutions?



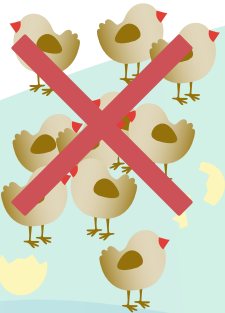
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# death

## 4 Animal disease control

Animals that are killed due to a health risk.

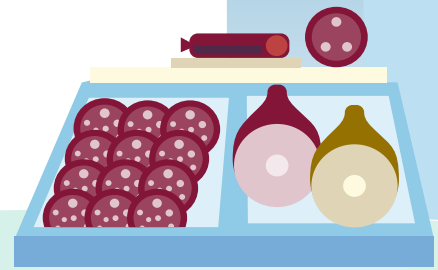
Is culling acceptable, and is it possible to limit or prevent it?



## 5 Human use

Animals that are killed for human use.

When production animals or laboratory animals are killed, is sufficient care taken to ensure their welfare?



## Conclusion

The killing of animals should never be taken for granted. It demands attention and careful consideration.



## Recommendations

1. Aim for prevention: fewer deaths
2. Careful consideration should form the basis for all decisions
3. Take animal welfare as the starting point
4. Make sure killing is carried out responsibly

# Brief summary of the advisory report

## Background and reason for the report

The killing of animals is an inseparable part of our dealings with animals. It is an uncomfortable topic that raises many questions. The fact that the killing of animals is handled differently in different situations makes it more complicated. Consider, for example, the killing of an animal that is causing a nuisance, compared to the euthanising of a beloved pet. Are these differences problematic, and should we make changes? Or are they justified, because the interests and values to be weighed up in each situation are different?

In 'The State of the Animal in the Netherlands' (2019), the Council on Animal Affairs (RDA) observed that people's attitudes towards animals have changed. Dutch people now have more respect for animals, and breaches of animal welfare are seen as less acceptable. Humans increasingly empathise with animals and believe that animals have rights, such as the right to live with dignity and the right to proper care.

Pigeons can become a nuisance in cities.



What does this changing human-animal relationship mean in terms of opinions about the killing of animals? That question is not easy to answer. This is a broad and wide-ranging topic, within which the differences between reasons to kill are not black and white.

## The goal: to initiate a public debate

In this advisory report, the RDA describes the 'landscape' of the killing of animals based on five different reasons: preventing or controlling nuisance, ending suffering, not fulfilling the intended purpose, animal disease control and killing for human use. The report examines a range of situations and the specific questions, conflicts and dilemmas involved.

The aim of this advisory report is to illustrate the complexity and provide tools to make it easier to discuss the wide variety of views and actions relating to the killing of animals. The RDA hopes that the report will provide an impetus for a wide-ranging debate that does justice to individual situations and incidents. The RDA also wants to highlight ways that animal welfare could be improved in situations involving killing.

## Five reasons for killing animals

### *Killing to prevent nuisance*

Every year, millions of animals are killed because they are causing a nuisance. This includes brown rats that can damage buildings and present a risk to public health, high-risk dogs that can cause biting incidents with serious consequences and geese that damage crops. In all cases of nuisance, factors that are considered include the extent of the nuisance or danger, possible non-lethal alternatives, how animal-friendly the method of killing is and any emotional connection. The consideration of these factors determines whether the





To end suffering is regarded a legitimate reason to kill.

animals will be killed, and the extent to which the killing will be accepted. Weighing up these factors can be difficult; for example, it may not be known how many animals are involved, or the alternatives could produce unknown results and/or be more time-consuming. There may not be an unambiguous policy, and it is not always clear who is responsible. In addition, the cause of the problem is often not addressed, increasing the likelihood that the nuisance will continue. The RDA advocates careful consideration of all factors when controlling nuisance caused by animals and has developed a proposal for an assessment framework. This framework recognises the intrinsic value of animals and is based on the 'no, unless' principle: animals should not be killed unless there are serious obstacles to choosing non-lethal methods.

### ***Killing to end suffering***

Ending hopeless or unbearable suffering is often seen as a legitimate reason to kill: euthanasia as an animal welfare measure. This is applied in a range of situations, such as pets experiencing hopeless suffering, sick or injured production animals that can no longer be treated, high-risk dogs in a shelter that cannot be adopted and wild animals in need of help. At first glance, euthanasia appears to be well regulated. But thorny issues arise with this topic too. For example, it is difficult to define the degree of suffering. When is an animal suffering so much that killing is the most animal-friendly solution? Another thorny issue concerns unequal treatment in comparable situations. In all cases, thinking about killing begins with the interests of the animal, but factors such as

financial importance, emotional connection and a lack of knowledge mean that one animal may be put out of its misery sooner than another. To prevent such unequal treatment, the RDA recommends that more assessment frameworks be developed or existing assessment frameworks be updated.

### Euthanasia of animals in the wild

It is difficult to decide what to do with sick or injured animals in the wild. On the one hand, we have a 'hands-off duty', meaning that we should leave nature alone wherever possible. On the other hand, we have a statutory duty of care for animals in need of help. There are legal methods to put an animal out of its misery. In practice, however, deciding what to do is often difficult. The RDA will address this topic in greater depth in a separate advisory report about dealing with wild animals in need of help, to be published in 2022.

### *The killing of animals that do not fulfil their intended purpose*

Each year, millions of animals are killed because they are an unwanted by-product of animal husbandry systems or because they disrupt the natural balance. Examples include male chicks of laying hens, the surplus of animals bred for research and zoos, pedigree rabbits that do not have the desired breed characteristics and raccoons that live as exotic species in the Netherlands. Support for the killing of unwanted animals depends on the situation. Acceptance appears to be great-

In layer poultry farming male chicks are unsuitable.



Photograph: Henk Riswick Fotografie





Animals on poultry farms are being culled in order to control the spread of bird flu.

er when the killing serves a useful secondary purpose, such as to provide food for other animals. Support also depends on how important the primary purpose is considered to be, the number of animals involved, the method of killing and possible alternatives. Alternatives to killing are available or conceivable in all cases, but they almost always raise new questions about practical feasibility, financial costs and animal welfare. Media attention contributes to the public debate. However, not all species of unwanted animals receive equal attention, for example because of lack of registration. In addition, public debates do not always allow space for the complexity of the subject. The reality is nuanced, and the killing of unwanted animals requires careful discussion and a proper weighing up of the various factors. The RDA believes that there is a need to look more

at the individual animal and less at the animal's contribution to the system. Based on this, systems could potentially be adjusted to prevent the killing of unwanted animals wherever possible.

#### ***Killing in the context of animal disease control***

In the context of animal disease control, it sometimes happens that groups of production animals may be killed if they constitute a health risk to humans and/or other (production) animals. In practice, this is known as 'culling'. Although there are statutory and procedural rules in place, the killing of large numbers of healthy animals remains a sensitive issue. Public acceptance of the culling policy should also not be taken for granted as much, because animal welfare and the value of animal lives occupy an increasingly prominent place in

public debate. Over the past 25 years, the Netherlands has faced a number of outbreaks, the most recent being bird flu in poultry and the coronavirus in minks. The culling of animals has both advantages and disadvantages. Quickly killing animals in infected populations avoids a number of animal welfare issues. But the process of culling can also involve animal welfare complications and risks, such as stress and anxiety. Support for culling partly depends on the magnitude of the threat to public health and the extent to which the killing method used is animal-friendly and effective. The RDA recommends ongoing investment in the prevention of the introduction and spread of infectious diseases. In this regard, it is important to also look at the possible infection pressure from non-captive animals and from humans to animals. In addition, the use of vaccinations in captive (and potentially also in wild) animal populations deserves attention, with a view to altering the infection dynamics in populations.

### *Killing for human use*

The largest category comprises animals killed for human use. This includes production animals in livestock farming, fish and game for consumption and laboratory animals for research.

The difference between this and the other reasons for killing is that, in this category, it is decided in advance that the animals will be killed. The RDA considers this to be a social reality and does not reflect on the desirability of such killing in this advisory report.

This report limits its discussions to the welfare of production animals on the final day of their lives. This covers collection from the farm, transport and arrival and reception at the slaughterhouse, up until the moment of death. This process is subject to all kinds of rules and laws concerning animal welfare, food safety and working conditions. For the largest groups of production animals (pigs and chickens), work is being done on additional protocols. However, there are many differences between establishments in

Pigs during transport to the slaughterhouse, where they will be killed for meat production.





terms of the development and application of these protocols. Throughout the sector, the RDA observes that improvements have been made and will continue to be made with regard to animal welfare, but there are also establishments where there is a lack of willingness to improve and where animal welfare is of secondary importance. The best approach in this regard consists of encouraging further changes while cracking down on animal welfare breaches. For qualitative improvements to be made in the slaughterhouse chain, the central focus must be on both human actions and the needs of the individual animal.

## Conclusions

Based on the five investigated reasons for killing, the RDA has drawn four overarching conclusions:

### ***1. A wide-ranging and uncomfortable topic***

The killing of animals is a wide-ranging and uncomfortable topic that raises many questions. The subject is in flux, and there is more to it than has emerged in the media and in public debate. For example, many methods have been developed to avoid the killing of animals, and animal welfare is increasingly being given prominence in new developments and legislation concerning killing.

### ***2. Killing should not be taken for granted***

Whether killing should be taken for granted is up for debate. Killing is seen as an action that requires more attention and discussion, with regard to both the execution of the action and the systems and practices that result in animals being killed.

### ***3. Discomfort hampers the conversation***

Discomfort around killing can hamper conversations on the topic. Such discomfort must not stand in the way of developments in the areas of prevention, careful consideration and responsible implementation. Therefore, a broader debate on this topic is essential.

### ***4. Duty of care entails responsibilities***

The statutory duty of care encompasses not only concern for the lives of animals, but also responsibility for limiting the killing of animals and carefully weighing all factors before making a decision to kill. This also means that the killing must be carried out by qualified persons at the right time.

## Recommendations

In line with these conclusions, the RDA has come up with four recommendations that are relevant to each of the reasons for killing described above.

### ***1. Aim for prevention: less killing***

The changing position of animals in society and the discomfort around the killing of animals require killing to be reduced or avoided through prevention. This can be achieved by removing the necessity of killing or by developing alternative solutions. This primarily applies to animals that are suffering, causing a nuisance, unwanted or being culled. With production animals and laboratory animals, killing is sometimes necessary to achieve the intended purpose.

### ***2. Careful consideration should form the basis for all decisions***

Recognition of the intrinsic value of animals means that killing should never be taken for granted. Each situation requires careful consideration, explicitly stating which interests are being taken into account and how animal welfare factors into the decision. An assessment framework may provide clarity in this process.

### 3. Think in terms of animal welfare

It is necessary and possible to think less in terms of the system and more from the perspective of the (individual) animal. The killing of animals often forms part of a specific system that sees animals as unwanted, threatening, less cuddly or less worthy of protection. That can hamper efforts to reduce killing and safeguard animal welfare.

### 4. Make sure killing is carried out responsibly

In every situation, it is important that killing is carried out with the greatest possible care by competent people. When choosing a method of killing, the priority should be ensuring it has the smallest possible negative impact on the people and animals concerned. In this regard, regulations should be investigated to address conflicts that hinder animal welfare improvements. These four recommendations concern everyone: all levels of government, sector parties, academia and citizens. Although the advisory report does not offer any simple solutions to the thorny issues, it may facilitate a broader debate about the killing of animals. The RDA looks forward to continuing the discussion with all interested parties.

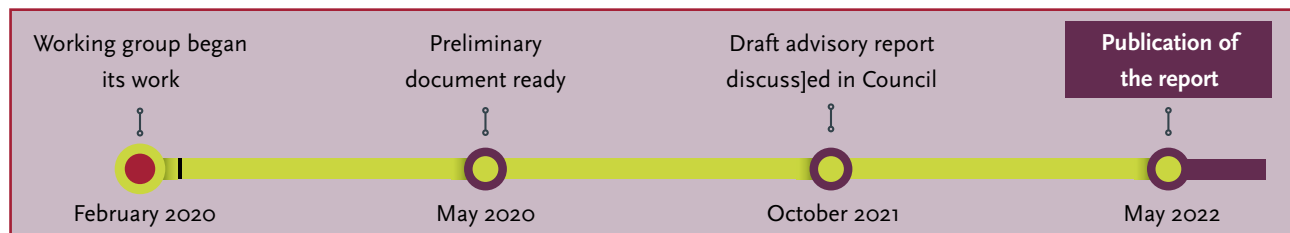
### Reflection by Bas Haring

What is the problem with killing animals? This question was the starting point for a reflection by philosopher of science and RDA member Bas Haring. He set out to find an answer using a number of reasons for why death is problematic in general.

The conclusion of his argument was that many of those possible reasons do not explain what specifically makes the killing of animals such an uncomfortable subject. He believes the explanation lies in the fact that killing puts the value of life in perspective and in the fact that it is irreversible.

As he himself said, this is a rudimentary answer. He expects that this uncomfortable subject will remain topical and demand our attention for some time to come. “But one way or another, I think it’s important to remain objective and rational when discussing this subject that affects us so deeply.”

Bas Haring’s reflection is included as an annex to the advisory report ‘Shining a light on the killing of animals’.



# Annex

## Composition of the Council on Animal Affairs

This advisory report from the Council on Animal Affairs was prepared under the leadership of Dr F.L.B. (Franck) Meijboom by a core group comprising Prof. B. (Bas) Kemp, Dr L.J.A. (Len) Lipman (from 1 September 2020), L. (Lisette) de Ruigh (until 1 September 2020), J. (Jan) Staman, LL.M. DVM, and R.A. (Ruud) Tombrock MSc. The core group was supported by deputy secretaries Dr T.J. (Tamara) Bergstra and R. (Ru) Pothoven and Secretary M.H.W. (Marc) Schakenraad MSc.

The drafting of this report involved the work of various sub-groups, to which various RDA members, former members, Young RDA members and RDA team members contributed.

The draft advisory report was submitted to the entire Council and to the Young RDA network for assessment. Accordingly, this advisory report is a product of the Council as a whole.

## As at 1 October 2021, the RDA had the following members:

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Dr G.B.C. Backus  
J.P. van den Berg  
W.T.A.A.G.M. van den Bergh  
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Dr J.J.L. Candel MA  
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Prof. J.W. Erisman  
Prof. R. Gehring  
D. van Gennep MSc  
Prof. M.A.M. Groenen  
Prof. S. Haring  
Prof. L.A. den Hartog  
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Dr J.B.F. van der Valk  
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The Secretary of the RDA is M.H.W. Schakenraad MSc



2022, Council on Animal Affairs, The Hague

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**Production and final editing:**

Bert Kleiboer

**Cover photograph:**

R.S. Hadfield ARPS / Adobe Stock

**Photographs on inside pages:**

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**Infographic:**

VormVijf

**Layout and printing:**

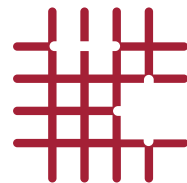
Xerox/Osage, Den Haag

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