Capitalism and the Value of Life: Foot-and-Mouth and the Culling of Herds

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Abstract. This article describes some psychological implications of culling as an intervention to help combat the spread of foot-and-mouth disease.

A previous IBPP article explored some political psychological issues surrounding the choices of vaccination and culling to help combat the spread of foot-and-mouth disease. What was not directly addressed concerns the differential values of life for humans versus animals--and the psychology related to the differential values.

Unlike bovine spongiform encephalopathy--i.e., mad cow disease--foot-and-mouth disease is rarely fatal to animals, is apparently not dangerous to humans, usually runs a transient course, and does not preclude the ingestion of meat from infected animals. The negative consequences of foot-and-mouth disease do include lowering the weight and milk production of infected animals and activating export bans on countries with infected animals concerning conspecifics and products from them. One can make a strong case, then, that the culling of infected and uninfected but proximal animals to combat foot-and-mouth disease is based not on health threats but on financial threats--that the spirit of capitalism is fomenting the deaths of animals on a significant basis.