BEHAVIOUR PATTERNS OF BEEF CATTLE IN RELATION TO
PRODUCTION IN THE DRY TROPICS

A.C. HASSALL

Summary

Temperament in cattle varies between breeds, and between
individuals within a breed. This paper considers the effect on animals
when temperament is not properly understood during handling. This lack
of understanding, tolerance, and knowledge may lead to real difficulties
in management, and consequent production losses. Practical examples
of the effect of good and bad management of calves and adult animals are
presented, and a case is made, pointing to man as the main cause for
the so-called "wild" animal, rather than any genetic reasons.

I. DISCUSSION

The generalization that animals are either wild or docile,
difficult to handle, or easy to manage, leads us to the question of
whether docility is an inborn quality, or whether the environment,
meaning man's handling methods, is the main factor in behaviour patterns.

Before we look further into this question, another question
becomes relevant: does it matter to any extent as regards production
of beef? If they are well fed then there should be no problems about
growth.

In many areas of beef production where animal husbandry methods
are satisfactory, and right proportions of feed nutrients are always
available, the temperament of animals presents no real problem, but in
the large breeding areas of the dry tropics of Queensland where each
year the normal rainless period of winter and spring imposes hardships
on animals with consequent loss of condition, these conditions lead
to stresses on the temperament of the animals. It is within this field
of temperament variation between individuals and between different breeds
that production potential may well be adversely affected.

The Brahman breed is often spoken of as temperamental or prone
to wildness when indifferently managed, but this is not, in my experience,
the result of a bad temperament, but rather the result of timidity,
accentuated by wrong handling.

Suppose we watch a mob of cows and calves being driven to the
yard. They are moving along quietly, feeding spasmodically, and one
of the drovers gets impatient and starts cracking his whip. Some of the
calves are frightened by this noise, a few turn away, then another whip
rack and one calf makes off away from the mob. The rider gives chase
and by now the calf is really frightened and gallops. If a fence happens
to be in its path it doesn't see it, smashes through it and once on the
other side the rider cannot follow. The calf is now "wild" and as long
as it lives, never forgets the incident. A calf of any breed would
react in much the same way to this treatment. That calf, if ignored

Meadowbank Station, P.O. Box 5, Mt Garnet, Queensland, 4872.
in the beginning, would soon have rejoined its mother and the mob. The point is obvious: quiet and sensible handling is the key to quiet calves, and it follows that properly handled calves grow into quiet cattle, irrespective of which breed is considered.

Let us consider another aspect of the fallacy called "wildness", generally supposed to be strongly inherited. In 1950 we bought our first Brahman-type bull (Monarch), aged five years, to mate with a selection of our Shorthorn females. "Monarch" was temperamental and had to be handled carefully and in other circumstances would certainly be classed as "wild". We used him for about ten seasons and his progeny were all normal animals, showing no temperamental stress. Many of these cattle later formed the nucleus of our Droughtmaster stud which was formed during the latter half of the fifties. "Monarch" was not born wild, but lack of understanding when young or careless handling brought out the adverse qualities which are dormant in most animals, and even man himself.

We introduced many more Bos Indicus bulls during the years and two purebred purchases in 1958 are worth considering. These yearling bulls appeared to have different temperaments and one, "Walpole", was easily handled and docile, while "Kismet" was touchy and required watching when drafting in the yards and was easily upset when yarding up. These bulls produced many calves and no temperamental difference was observed between those by either one. Some years later, "Walpole" and "Kismet" were mustered with a group of cows and the bulls started fighting on very stoney ground. "Walpole" tripped and went down and could not get up. We left him and yarded the mob. Later we went back to move him, without success, and it was apparent our efforts were resented and our docile bull from that day on was a different animal. He would charge any horse and rider that came too close and in the yard was "wilder" than his "wild" mate "Kismet".

Once again, the point is clear - handling methods are more important than the temperament factor, though there may be occasions when only hindsight can point out the human failure to understand the animal's reaction to a given situation.

There is a loss of production in individuals that race around, continually clear out and are difficult to yard up. As an extreme example, there are areas in the Cape York Peninsula and around the Gulf of Carpentaria where there are herds of cattle run wild, cannot be mustered, so that there is NO production from these herds. Young stock handled roughly resent man, keep out of his way, making drafting difficult. Persistence with rough handling leads to the production of wild adult cattle.

It is stupid when bringing cattle to the stock yards during a dry time not to let them browse any small areas of green feed that may be on the way. Failure to do so will lead to their "breaking back" to the desired green pasture, thus leading to more wasted time, wilder cattle, and not very happy men. Quiet but firm handling of stock cannot start too early in a beast's life. The younger the animal, the most susceptible it is to mishandling.
These examples could be multiplied indefinitely, and would all lead to the same conclusion: that "wild" cattle may well be an economic loss, and avoidance of this loss is within the scope of we cattlemen, provided we are capable of observing, learning, and understanding, and that force alone seldom achieves satisfactory results.