AWRN at 10: Learning from the Past, Shaping the Future



This September, the 10th meeting of the Animal Welfare Network saw over 120 delegates from a variety of disciplines come together in the wonderful setting of Chester Zoo to share their experiences and knowledge and to learn about progress in animal welfare.

While a full report of the meeting will be available shortly, this is a briefer reflection of the breadth and wealth of animal welfare science presented during the conference, which also offered opportunities to enjoy the wonderful surroundings of Chester Zoo as well as prompting lively discussions and chances to share ideas.



Before the main event commenced, the Early Career Afternoon welcomed delegates who are at the beginning of their journeys in animal welfare and offered an opportunity to create new connections. An informative session on the use of AI to enhance animal welfare science offered some great insights and provided a chance from some lively group activity sessions considering the pros and cons of AI use and the scenarios in which we might use it.



This was followed by a thought-provoking panel discussion which offered insight into career opportunities beyond academia, generously supported by contributions from representatives from a variety of animal welfare backgrounds in industry and research. It was a chance for the attendees to hear and to ask about experiences, opportunities and challenges in what proved to be a lively and informative session.



The theme of the 10th AWRN Annual Meeting, “Learning from the Past, Shaping the Future”, offered the perfect platform for reflections on animal welfare science progression over the last decade, as well as the exciting developments defining the future of this field. The warm welcomes given by the network’s Poppy Statham and Gareth Arnott underlined AWRN’s role in supporting this, revealing that the network has grown to include over 1500 members who contribute to a supportive community promoting animal welfare research.



The conference opened with Donald Broom's plenary 'A look back at, and forwards from, the last decade of animal welfare science' which showcased the huge changes in both attitude and input to animal welfare science and a change in focus from merely addressing negative welfare issues to promoting positive welfare. While covering a wealth of areas that we must consider in animal welfare, from the terminology that we use, to sentience and sustainability, Donald left the audience with a clear message of the importance of communication and collaboration.

The first day of the conference continued with a range of presentations that covered insights into animal welfare in a variety of environments, from educational settings to zoos, from farms to laboratories and cat cafes to the companion animals that share our homes. The delegates also heard about the role of Horizon Scanning to identify emerging questions in animal welfare and beyond and comprehensive updates from UKRI and BBSRC including the new 5-year strategy and ways to apply for funding. There was also the launch of a survey considering how widely Human Behaviour Change is used as a framework in animal welfare (access from this QR code) to identify priorities and evaluate its use. Plenaries from Lisa Holmes looking at how data science is shaping zoo welfare and Rick D'Eath's perspective of changes in animal welfare policy were both informing and thought-provoking, triggering questions.

The second day of the conference was launched by Gareth Arnott describing the new AWRN Working Group on Virtual Fencing and highlighting the opportunity to nominate a topic for other Working Groups. He then handed over to Sally Westworth to introduce the presentation of the inaugural Early Career Impact Award sponsored by McDonald's. Ellie Wotherspoon made the presentation to Simao Zacarias in recognition of his pioneering work which has delivered transformative improvements in the welfare of farmed shrimp worldwide. This was followed by the Early Career plenary delivered by Kate Lewis with an informative and enjoyable journey of the use of ethograms in behavioural studies, underlining the importance of clarity and accessibility in their use.





The final day again brought a wealth of animal welfare science to the delegates, covering a diversity of topics from play to individuality, automation to monitoring, heat-stress to grazing, wearable technology to behavioural changes, with the importance of open science, public engagement and policy also brought to the forum. The conference heard from Lucy Asher about the AWRN mentoring scheme, which brings support, development and collaboration within the network. The second

day provided an opportunity to get involved in one of three workshops which considered the implications of ‘Making animal welfare data FAIRer’, the ‘What, who and how of collaborations between academics and practitioners’ alongside ‘Getting involved in EU welfare research and networks’.



The presentations were concluded by an entertaining and engaging Impact Plenary delivered by Robert Hyde, who shared his personal experience and professional life as a veterinarian. He acknowledged the advances in technology and AI and their use but left the audience in no doubt that animal welfare is dependent upon the humans in the loop.

The questions prompted by the speakers and lively discussion throughout the breaks and social event emphasised the collaborative energy generated by the meeting.







