

Nose ring in pigs

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In countries where pigs, mostly breeding sows, are kept out doors it is relatively common practice to fit a nose ring on the animals. The purpose of the ring is to prevent the pigs from rooting and digging. The ring is assumed to cause pain when the snout is used for rooting, because by ringing the pigs this behaviour is stopped or reduced. The nose ring contributes to keeping the grass green and in good condition for longer. Otherwise, the pigs would turn up the field by searching for roots, worms and anything edible. Rooting behaviour causes the ground to become damaged and brown. It becomes less resistant to wear and tear and easily becomes muddy in wet weather conditions. On the whole, the area becomes less aesthetically attractive. Another reason for ringing is to prevent the sows from digging deep nests inside the huts that can cause piglets to be at greater risk for being squashed and injured.

Ringing of pigs is prohibited according to the animal protection act §13. In the act it is, nevertheless, stated that veterinarians may fit nose rings on pigs as long as this is performed according to "regulations given by the Department when utility reasons call for it". Such a regulation was given in 1963 and this opened for a possibility for veterinarians to ring breeding sows on pasture. Later, the use of pasture became less important in pig farming, and the regulation was revoked in 1996.

Nevertheless, the question of nose rings in pigs has been renewed. Out door keeping of wild boar crosses has gained some popularity, and in recent years some farmers have started free range pig farming similar to systems practiced abroad. The sows are given individual huts placed in an outdoor area. The piglets are born inside the huts and use the hut as a base. The sows have a free life not far from natural life. The management system must be considered more animal friendly than traditional pig rearing where the sows have little space and reduced possibility for expressing natural behaviour. The Council for Animal Ethics are very positive to free range rearing of pigs.

The Council's attitude to free range pig rearing is not the same, however, if it depends on the use of nose rings. The fitting of the ring is undoubtedly painful if the pigs are not anaesthetised. It is, nevertheless, the effect that the ring has on the pigs' natural behaviour that is emphasised by the Council. The nose ring prevents the pigs from expressing a strong biological driving force, namely to use their snout. Pigs are very active animals, and studies of free range pigs have shown that when the animals are awake they spend significant amounts of time rooting. This also applies to animals that get their nutritional needs fully satisfied through concentrates. It can be assumed that a great deal of frustration is caused to the animals if rooting, which is a strongly motivated behaviour, is prevented because of pain.

It should be possible to keep pigs in free range conditions without ringing them. This does, however, cause the need for more frequent change of the outdoor area. The use of the fields can be rotated between pigs and grass or corn crops. The huts are easy to move, and pigs are easily confined by using movable electric fencing. By using well designed huts and plenty of bedding, the problem of rooting and digging within the huts can be minimised.

The Council holds the opinion that there are significant benefits to animal welfare through free range rearing of pigs. This cannot, however, justify the use of nose rings. In a time where our knowledge of the needs and natural behaviour of domestic animals is ascribed increasing

importance when laws and regulations are formulated, it would be a step in the wrong direction to permit procedures that have the purpose of preventing natural behaviour by inflicting pain. On these grounds the Council for Animal Ethics advises the Ministry of Agriculture not to permit nose rings in pigs.