

Animal Welfare on Trial: Enforcement in Danish Animal Transport Offences

Anna Ulrikke Bruun, Louise Victoria Johansen

University of Copenhagen, Faculty of Law, the Copenhagen Centre for Criminology, Denmark

In this paper, we combine veterinary, legal, and anthropological perspectives to investigate how knowledge about animal welfare during transport is produced, interpreted, and assessed within the Danish legal system. Denmark provides a particularly relevant site for this inquiry: at any given time, between 11 and 13 million pigs live in the country, and in 2025 alone more than 31 million pigs were transported within and out of Denmark, of which over 16 million were exported for fattening and slaughter. The scale and intensity of these movements make animal transport a central arena in which animal welfare is also legally defined and contested.

The protection of farm animal welfare during transport is regulated through both EU and national legislation and enforced through roadside control carried out by the police, typically assisted by veterinarians, as well as through inspections in slaughterhouses and assembly barns. Sanctions range from guidance and warnings to injunctions, prohibitions, and charges; however, most violations never reach court and result only in administrative warnings. When cases do proceed to trial, they rely heavily on veterinary evidence and its correct interpretation, making veterinary expertise crucial to how animal suffering becomes legally recognisable.

This presents linguistic and conceptual challenges, since diagnoses and assessments are understood differently across professional contexts. Crucial aspects may be lost in “translation,” for example when pathology reports written in technical veterinary language are evaluated by legal professionals unfamiliar with their implications for animal pain and suffering. In this process, the Danish Veterinary Health Council plays a pivotal role by advising criminal justice authorities on the severity of offences, effectively acting as an institutional translator between veterinary medicine and law. These translation practices shape which harms are acknowledged, how responsibility is assigned, and ultimately what counts as justice for animals.

To examine how such translations unfold in practice, we draw on courtroom observations of animal transport cases and semi-structured interviews with defence attorneys, prosecutors, judges, and members of the Veterinary Health Council. This socio-legal empirical approach is combined with Actor-Network Theory, as elaborated by Bruno Latour and John Law, which treats both human and non-human entities, including animals, documents, diagnoses, and legal instruments, as actors within shifting networks. This approach enables us to analyse how animal welfare is actively “assembled” across professional domains.

By tracing these transformations, the paper shows how animal welfare is materially and epistemically produced in legal settings and contributes to understanding how justice for animals is negotiated across institutional boundaries.

Anna Ulrikke Bruun is a PhD-student at the University of Copenhagen where she is a part of the project “ANIMALAW - An interdisciplinary study of Danish animal welfare offences in animal transport - legal, veterinary and anthropological perspectives”. The project maps Danish practices in animal welfare cases concerning animal transport and examines whether these practices meet today’s standards regarding animal perception, expertise, and legal transparency. Anna originally studied veterinary medicine for 5 years before beginning law school. Her research focuses on the ethical considerations behind the Danish animal welfare legislation and on the use and interpretation of veterinary evidence in legal cases.

Louise Victoria Johansen is an associate professor at the Faculty of Law at the University of Copenhagen. She works within the area of Law and Anthropology and is theoretically inspired by the field of sociology of knowledge, personhood, and the role of emotion in law. Her research focuses on knowledge processes across different criminal justice institutions such as the police, the prosecutor's office, the judiciary, and the prison and probation service. Using ethnographic methods in these settings, she has studied how documents, case files, and expert opinions construct what courts ‘know’ about cases; and how these processes may influence courts’ perceptions of animal welfare cases.