

## PROTOCOL FOR EXPERT REPORT ON ANIMAL WELFARE AS SUPPORT FOR COURT DECISIONS IN CASE OF ANIMAL CRUELTY SUSPICION

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Our objective was to develop and test a protocol for expert report on animal welfare when there is suspicion of crimes against animals. Based on welfare assessment literature, the protocol includes four groups of indicators: nutrition, comfort, health and behavior. Each group is assessed as inadequate, regular or adequate; results are then integrated into a final welfare degree. A simple integration method is employed, based on thresholds, for five final degrees: very low, low, regular, high or very high welfare. Very low welfare is declared when three or more groups of indicators are classified as inadequate or when open intentional physical aggression is present; low welfare is reported when one or two groups of indicators are inadequate; regular welfare when two or more groups of indicators are considered regular, high welfare when only one group of indicators is regular, and very high welfare when all groups of indicators are considered adequate. Very low and low welfare situations are reported as animal abuse, subject to criminal penalties. Regular welfare situations are monitored for corrective measures. Cases where high or very high welfare is characterized are dismissed. A preliminary protocol was first used in two circuses, providing sentences of abuse for one elephant and five lions. Subsequently, it was tested with 101 community dogs and results were mostly regular (60.4%) and high (35.6) welfare. The protocol was adapted to puppy mill (260 dogs) and dog shelter (375 dogs) situations, through group evaluation, providing animal abuse evidences related to faults in cleanliness, good health and adequate nutrition. The protocol was also adapted to draught horses (32), with 90.6% of the horses presenting very low welfare. Regarding suspicion of cockfighting, the protocol allowed for animal abuse confirmation in all 41 cocks studied, even though there was no fighting flagrant. With two polar bears in a zoo, the results showed necessary improvements for animal quality of life and allowed for the animal abuse accusation to be dismissed. We conclude that the protocol allows differentiation of animal welfare status to better decide whether an animal is under abuse. We hope that the refinement in the recognition of crimes against animals, especially considering cases where no physical lesion is present, will improve perception of animal suffering, facilitate the field work of those involved in this type of investigation, and offer a contribution to the improvement of animal welfare in our society through proper action and crime reduction.

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