

Chapter 2. Introduction to pig welfare

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Wild boar – ancestor of the modern pig

More than a billion pigs are produced in the world each year making it the most common mammal reared for meat.

In northern Europe, pigs all originate from the wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) and were domesticated around 8 or 9 thousand years ago.

The living conditions of the wild boar and the intensively reared pig could not be more different. Wild boars are found in a range of habitats but most commonly close to wooded areas and river valleys. Intensive pigs are kept indoors on floors that are made of solid or slatted concrete or of perforated metal that can be either bare or plastic coated. In most systems they are not provided with bedding such as straw because it could interfere with the collection and spreading of liquefied manure.

Social groups are also radically different. Wild boars live in small family groups consisting of 2-4 sows and their young. They can range over hundreds of

kilometres. The young are not weaned until they are 13-17 weeks of age. In intensive systems, the piglets are separated from their mothers at 3-4 weeks. The breeding stock sows remain closely confined throughout their lives. The piglets are crowded into small barren pens and stay in these conditions until they are ready for slaughter after 24 weeks.



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Modern sows retain many of the behaviours of their ancestors

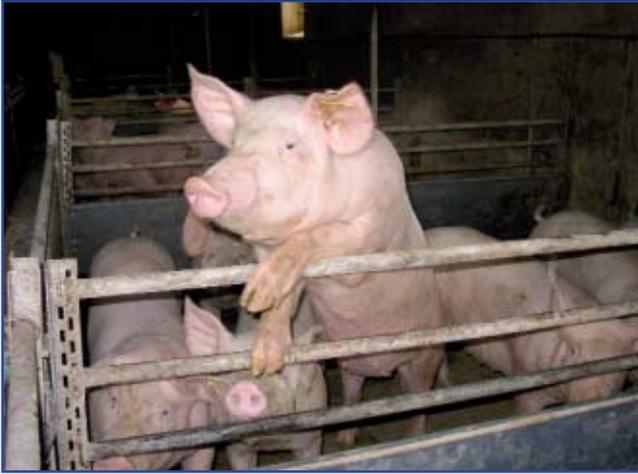
Yet, despite years of domestication, modern pigs have maintained a range of behaviours inherited from their ancestors; in intensive systems many of the welfare problems stem from the fact that they are unable to carry out many of these behaviours because of restrictions that are imposed by the environment.

The pigs generally do not have access to bedding, or any other forms of organic enrichment. This increases discomfort and problems with injuries. The lack of suitable substrate such as straw, grain husks or ground wood means that they are unable to carry out their foraging activities for which they are highly motivated.

Table 1. Differences in characteristics of the wild boar and intensively reared pig

	Wild boar	Intensively reared pig
Range	Up to 2,500 ha	Closely confined or highly stocked
Social organisation	Family groups	Separation of mother and young
Birth	In farrowing nests	Closely confined
Litter size	6	10
Piglets reared per year	6	24
Weaning	13-17 weeks	3-4 weeks (sometimes 2 weeks in the USA)
Time to reach puberty	18 months	6 months
Urination and defaecation	In demarked sites	Where they stand (sows)
Temperature regulation	Nests, wallows, shades and huddling	Largely unable to regulate (sows)
Diet	Highly varied, fibrous, not easy to find	Concentrate, low in fibre, eaten in 15 minutes

Pigs are very intelligent, highly sociable animals. They are sentient creatures; they can experience pain, fear and frustration and in some tests of intelligence, can even out perform dogs. Attitudes to pigs are beginning to change. This has been born mainly out of greater understanding of the welfare issues by the public and this has given rise to new welfare legislation in many countries.



Pigs are sentient beings – creatures with feelings that matter to them



The role of the stockperson is vital in all farming systems

Summary

Pigs are descended from the wild boar. Despite domestication, pigs have inherited many of the behaviours and ethological needs of their wild ancestors. Many welfare problems arise because modern intensive systems frustrate their natural responses and behaviours.