

‘Suffering’ in bullfighting bulls; An ethologist’s perspective

By Jordi Casamitjana

My contribution to this trial is to give an expert account of the fact that bulls suffer during any of the bullfighting activities that take place around the world. With this testimony, based on my scientific background as a zoologist specialising in animal behaviour, as well as the fact that I have myself witnessed and recorded all the main types of bullfighting events, I hope to give an objective account that will help the Court to make its judgement in this case.

I will try to answer several questions. Firstly, whether bulls and cows suffer in bullfights and associated activities; secondly, whether I know any bullfighting style where bulls do not suffer; and thirdly whether we can say that some acts within bullfighting do not produce suffering.

Suffering and pain are biological traits that have been evolving in animals for hundreds of millions of years and they have been spread all over the animal kingdom by natural selection. This is because they serve a fundamental function for survival : informing the animal about what it needs to avoid. Pain, in particular, informs an animal which specific stimuli it needs to avoid (for example, fire). For this purpose the animal has pain receptors and a memory that allows it to remember what caused the pain. Suffering has the same function, but instead of informing the animal about a stimulus to avoid, it informs it about a situation to avoid. Therefore, to experience suffering the animal needs an awareness of its environment, the ability to develop moods that coordinate a behavioural response, and the capacity to change adverse situations or avoid them. No scientist would doubt that all these characteristics are present in all mammals, due to their relative big brains and complex behaviour.

From a biological, zoological and evolutionary point of view we can be certain that the immense majority of animal species on Earth today, and certainly all mammals, have the capacity to suffer. The ultimate confirmation of this is that at least one of them, the human species, can verbally testify its own experiences and describe them indeed as suffering - or in other words, something adverse they do not want to experience again - and which negatively alters their moods.

The fact that we can hear from humans their accounts of suffering and pain allows us to correlate such experiences with factors we can observe in their physiology and behaviour. Once we establish the appropriate correlations, we can then easily look for the same ‘clues’ in other species to identify ‘when’ they are suffering. Specific neurological or endocrine clues are commonly used by biologists and veterinarians, while facial expressions, body language and behaviour are used by ethologists.

One can then assess whether bulls suffer in bullfights, by looking at their behaviour alone. As far as the definition is concerned we can already say that bullfighting produces suffering, since it is commonly defined as any activity where cattle are stressed, exhausted, injured and/or killed for entertainment, celebration or sport. Stress, exhaustion, injuries and death are all causes of suffering and all mammals try to avoid them if they can.

Bullfighting events can be divided into ‘bullfights’ and popular ‘fiestas’. The first one happens in bullrings where bulls (or cows) and specially trained people engage one another. The second occurs in streets or in open fields and the bulls or cows engage members of the general public, who have not been specially trained for the occasion.

I will concentrate more on the first type, sometimes called ‘bullfighting proper’. This takes place in nine countries around the world, but in four distinctive styles, the “Spanish style”, the “Portuguese style” and two French styles, the “Course Camarguese” and the “Course Landaise”. Not all of styles involve the killing of the bull - this occurs only in the Spanish and Portuguese styles, (although in Portugal the killing does not happen in public). The bull is not injured on purpose in all styles, only in Spanish and Portuguese styles, but in all styles of bullfighting the bull is stressed and exhausted.

Let’s start with examples of stress. The following video shows part of a Course Landside bullfight in which the cow (typically used in this style of bullfighting) is tied by a rope and repeatedly pulled and teased to charge. The body language of the cow is clear. Not only does it move its head showing that it does not want to go where the bullfighters pull it , but it repeatedly runs towards the door from which it entered the ring, in order to flee and avoid the ‘adverse’ situation. It is not surprising the cow does not want to be pulled, since at the end of that rope it will be teased repeatedly and eventually stabbed with a pointed stick that will naturally produce pain. As the cow then runs in fear towards the door, the bullfighters jump acrobatically in its path, which is the purpose of the “show”. The pain of pulling on the rope, sometimes violently as can be seen in the video, turning the cow’s head with the potential of neck injuries, and the repeated stabbing of the pointed stick, is the adverse situation the cow is trying to avoid, especially if it has been used before for similar events. The fact that this takes place continuously, without giving the cow much of a break, turns a negative experience into stress as because of the rope the cow is unable to flee the negative experience despite repeated attempts and the anticipation of what is going to happen next plays a further role in increasing its feeling of suffering.

The case of exhaustion can be better illustrated with the video of the Course Camargaise. In this style the bull is constantly teased by “runners” who use a hand-held instrument to try to cut strings tied between its horns. This takes place continuously whilst the bull runs after each runner without stopping. Note in the video the facial expression of the bull with the tongue out and lifting its head less and less. These are all signs of exhaustion, caused by the continuous running. In fact, the runners count on that exhaustion to be able to get close enough to the bull to pull the string between its horns.

In the video the frustration of the bull is noticeable in its vocalizations. Many animals that suffer do not express their suffering in a clear way we can understand, since the expression of suffering only has a major biological function when we are talking about social species, where the suffering of one individual can be communicated to others, allowing them to learn which situation to avoid without needing to suffer the experience themselves. In the case of primates, facial expressions inform others about suffering since most primates are social. In the case of the human primate, crying is another good example. Bovids, the group of mammals cattle belong to, live in herds, and therefore do have a social life, although perhaps not as complex as in primates. Therefore, you would expect that there will be communication between bulls and cows about bad experiences too, and in this case this takes the form of vocalizations. The bull in the video is not ‘complaining’ without reason, but is indeed calling other bulls letting them know that something bad is happening here. This call may take the

form of 'calling for help', or simply 'warning about danger', and only detailed studies can fine tune its precise meaning, but there is no doubt that it refers to an adverse situation.

Stress and exhaustion are also key elements in the Spanish and Portuguese bullfights. For instance, in Portuguese bullfights, in which the main bullfighter is on a horse, the horse only charges two or three times and is immediately replaced by a 'fresh' one (each bullfighter coming to the event with several horses), which means that the bull is getting tired while the horse is not.

One can certainly say that the stress starts well before the bull enters the arena. Images of bulls during transport or in the areas where they wait before they are forced one by one into the arena, show this clearly.

Sometimes, the bull is tied by its horns to the ceiling of the lorry and transported this way in the heat over a long distance, as in this photo. This is bound to stress the bull. The bull will not be able to move, not even to scratch itself if it needs to, for a long time. In the case of Course Landaise or Camargaise, as in the photo, this situation may take place twice, before and after the event, and sometimes several times during the life of the bull, adding the anxiety of the anticipation of what is going to happen to the factors that contribute to the animal's stress.

This photo also shows the bulls- in this case with young bulls for an 'amateur' bullfight - behaving as a herd behaves when there is danger around. Getting close to each other and covering their backs with one another, with their eyes fixed on the possible source of danger. Bulls that are transported and taken to a bullring will be in this constant state of alert, not being able to figure out what is going on. Pain will also be used to move them around. All this will, of course, cause them stress, so by the time they enter the arena, they are already stressed out.

In the arena, especially when bullfighters start to provoke the bulls and, in the case of the Spanish and Portuguese style, injure them with the *puya* (Spanish style) or the *banderillas* (both styles), the bull's behaviour takes one of two forms. Either try to flee the adverse situation or try to confront it if there does not seem to be a way out.

Bullrings are in fact 'rings' so it becomes impossible for the bull to find a corner where it can protect itself against the attacks. However, sometime the bulls do try to jump the fence in desperation, as it can be seen in this case of French style bullfighting, again showing the bull is suffering to such an extent so as to want to escape in this manner.

The most common response to attack would be to turn towards the attacker and to try to push him away with its horns. This is a behaviour that can be seen in many herbivores when they have been hunted by natural predators or humans. For instance, deer hunted by hunters that use packs of hounds, as in the case of the now banned practice in England of stag-hunting, behave by fleeing for hours, but when they are exhausted and cannot run anymore, stags then turn to the hounds and try to push them away with their antlers. This is called 'stag at bay', and is the time when the human hunter approaches and shoots the stag. The bulls in bullfights respond, therefore, as if they have no choice other than to charge, since all escape routes are cut off and the bull is injured which triggers this 'last resource' behaviour. Therefore, the behaviour of the bull is consistent with what would be a 'bull at bay', which explains its charging.

In other words, the charging of the bull should not be interpreted as an attack (so the term “fight” in bullfighting is an absolute misnomer), but as a way to push away the attackers, to avoid the adverse situation. In addition to the stress, the exhaustion and now the injuries caused by the weapons, the bull eventually faces the matador’s sword, which, more often than not, inflicts terrible internal injuries on the bull but it remains alive and standing for a considerable time. We then see several facial expressions that anybody, ethologist or not, can easily interpret as severe suffering. The bull’s final behaviour confirms it even more. It tries to walk towards the edge of the ring, where the exit is bound to be, as its last attempt to escape, or at the very least to cover its back. Sometimes it even approaches a bullfighter that does not appear to be hostile at that instance, as if looking for help or mercy.

Bulls, otherwise very peaceful animals that spend most of their lives eating grass, sleeping and playing with each other, are submitted to such an ordeal that not only inflicts serious suffering on them, but also forces them to behave in ways they would not normally behave, namely charging other creatures so they go away, giving them the false reputation of being ‘brave’, which any other herbivore would have in the same circumstances.

Therefore, my answers to the three questions are: yes, all behavioural evidence shows that bulls and cows suffer in bullfights; yes, they do suffer in all types of bullfights, even in those that do not end with their deaths; and yes, all aspects of any bullfight, from the transport to the death, are in themselves causes of suffering.

Thank you very much.

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