

Questions in Response to the Brahman Journal Article

By Herman Detering

1. Question: I found your article very interesting but couldn't help wondering whether your method of handling cattle is something anyone can learn or does it require some special ability?

Answer: This approach to cattle requires no "special gift" or aptitude. It's very much like learning to dance. Most people can learn the steps, but if you have no sense of rhythm you will never be very good at it. Likewise, I can teach you the concepts and show you how I apply them, but it's only if you have a basic sense of feel and timing that, through practice, you will become good at it. This should be no problem if you have an average sense of empathy and are willing to give up the human tendency to force and capture prey animals.

2. Question: How would cattle handle after you trained them and left? In other words, is the learning on their part transferable to another person?

Answer: The short answer is yes, the training is transferable, but each handler must personally establish a sense of rapport with the cattle.

The longer answer requires you to think of being a prisoner in a country where no one speaks your language. From time to time guards come in and yell and threaten you in order to move you from place to place. Sometimes this turns out well and you are fed. Other times you are forced to endure considerable pain and discomfort. You never know what lies in store for you. Naturally, you become apprehensive and sometimes resist their orders.

Then, one day, a guard comes in who speaks your language and explains exactly what the options are and that you will be able to choose the one you want.

Now, you understand clearly, in your own language, and the guard always does what he promises. Even though you don't always like the choices he presents to you, things go much better than before. As a result, you come to respect and trust the guard.

So far, so good. This is the point in the story where I, as the guard, step out and a new handler steps in. When I am finished working with the cattle they have a sense that the human is capable of not forcing them like predators normally do, and is able to relate to them through body language that mirrors the language they use among themselves.

When I leave, the cattle are primed and ready to listen to a new handler. They will have lost most of their fear of humans and are ready to accept direction in a calm and trusting manner. The new handler must now begin to apply the body language of cattle as I have shown him. Through this, through causing them to move without alarm or pain, the new handler will quickly gain the needed trust, respect, and control.

3. How Do You Work With Wild, Excitable, or Aggressive Cattle?

There are many flip, short answers to this such as "sell them," or "just don't," or "cautiously," and, a considered response might involve adopting one or more of these suggestions. However, from the point of view of handling, if you choose to work with difficult or dangerous cattle, there are several things you need to keep in mind.

First, you must always remain safe and avoid injury to the animal if at all possible. Next, you must diagnose the situation as best you can. Are the animals primarily aggressive because they have been handled roughly for many years? Are they excitable because they are being worked in overcrowded or slippery

pens? Or, are they simply frightened range cattle that have had little prior contact with humans? Put another way, are you seeing learned behavior or simply a natural response of a trapped prey animal in the presence of a predator?

Cattle that have learned to cope by responding with aggressive behavior require “therapeutic” handling whereas cattle that are just excited because of new and strange circumstances can be handled quite differently. In both cases, however, you need to move away and let them calm down before trying to deal with them.

Cattle that show aggressive behavior primarily as an adaptive technique can often be retrained by showing that such behavior doesn’t get them anywhere and is not necessary. In such cases I will place aggressive animal in a small, secure pen. Then I will approach the pen very slowly, advancing and retreating, with a flag attached to a long pole. As the situation allows, I will introduce the flag into the pen and work to get the animal use to having the flag touch her. As I make progress, I will advance down the pole until finally I can replace the flag with my hand. Other techniques include removing all food and water from the animal’s pen and you becoming the sole provider and set the conditions under which they can eat and drink.

With excitable cattle that are just weaned or simply new to human contact, much less focused and dramatic methods can be used. You need to pace yourself carefully, as if they were deer, as you advance into their flight zone. “Training breakfasts” where you move back and forth from their source of feed can also be helpful. Also, anytime you can move them slowly and calmly around a pen, you help bring down their urge to flee or attack you. I have even worked buffalo in this way and it very effective.

Carrying a stick passively at your side can come in handy if you get into trouble. Cattle and wild prey animals respect and tend to move away from both objects that loom overhead and any item that flaps in a quick or irregular manner.

4. Question: Is there a danger in this “softer” approach of creating a herd of “pets” that you have a hard time getting to move?

Answer: There is little danger of this if you are careful to teach driving along with drawing as you train them. As in many things, balance is the key. You don’t want them fleeing from you and you don’t want them in your lap. You want them to regard you without fear but with respect.

Many people do not understand that it is in the nature of cattle as herd-oriented prey animals to seek a social hierarchy and be comfortable with this order once it is established. When you drive an animal away with controlled, prey-like pressure, you actually create a deeper bond with that animal. You have caused it to yield its feet to you and so you are looked to for leadership, and with that leadership comes the power to direct and control.

