

# ARE OUR 'MAGICAL MOMENTS' WORTH THEIR SUFFERING?

Welfare concerns for reindeer



**OneKind**

Ending cruelty  
to Scotland's animals

**The drastically unfamiliar environment and lack of \*agency associated with events, such as Christmas parades, are likely to lead to psychological distress and a state of poor welfare.**

Key welfare concerns for reindeer used at events are:

- The event environment presents a variety of stimuli that may be perceived as threats, including loud noises and other animals. While reindeer may express vigilance in response to these threats, they have limited agency to act upon them, leading to fear. Constant fear and vigilance will contribute to an overall status of poor welfare.
  - The event environment also restricts reindeer's ability to engage in natural behaviours necessary for their wellbeing.
  - The constant, unfamiliar and unpredictable interaction with the public through petting and feeding has the potential to be stressful for reindeer.
- Long distance travel, repeated loading and unloading and pulling Santa's sleigh can cause physical and mental fatigue.
  - The stress of transportation and the event environment can compromise immune system function, making them more susceptible to disease and infection.

\*Agency means the ability of animals to make choices, have control over some aspects of their lives, overcome challenges, and engage actively with their environment to gather knowledge and develop skills. These processes are rewarding and the abilities can help animals cope with new or difficult situations. Agency is important for good welfare.



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## INTRODUCTION

OneKind commissioned a review of all the scientific papers that have been published on reindeer welfare. The author, Dr Tayla Hammond, used the widely accepted Five Domains model to assess reindeer welfare in captive environments in the UK, and at entertainment events, such as Christmas parades and Santa's grottos.

This model assesses four physical domains – nutrition, physical environment, health, and behavioural interactions – that together contribute to the fifth domain, mental state, and the overall welfare of the animal.

The review found no published evidence at all about the mental state of reindeer, and

limited research on captive reindeer. These evidence gaps make it more difficult to make recommendations on how to improve reindeer welfare; however, it is possible to identify potential impacts on their welfare using the available evidence on reindeer and on related species and those with similar life histories.

The full review describes all of the possible impacts on reindeer welfare, both positive and negative in each of the five domains, of being captive and being used in events. Here, we summarise some of the key concerns raised by the review.

# IN CAPTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Reindeer are a semi-domesticated species, whose natural environment is drastically different to captivity in the UK. Animal welfare experts and veterinarians have voiced concern over the lack of suitability of reindeer for the type of domestication seen in the UK, particularly for those used in entertainment.

## Nutrition

Reindeer have very specific nutritional needs which can be hard to meet in captivity, sometimes leading to poor body weight, muscle atrophy, and general malaise. In the wild they graze and browse on a wide range of plants, including herbs and lichens. It can be difficult to replicate their feeding habits and variety of foods in captivity, possibly leading to frustration and boredom.

## Physical environment

For good welfare, reindeer need a cold climate, space to roam and browse away from other species, an appropriate social group, shelter, and multiple food and water sources. The lack of any of these can compromise welfare. The most common problem is limited space, which can create risk of disease spread, competition for resources, and injuries. Also, the lush quality pastures grown for sheep and cows are unsuitable for reindeer and can lead to serious digestive conditions.



## Health

Captive reindeer are at risk of a variety of diseases. This risk can be reduced by good care and a suitable environment, but incorrect management has been reported as the primary cause of poor health and death in the UK.

## Behavioural interactions

If reindeer are not able to engage in natural behaviours, including roaming, browsing, resting, grooming, and playing, they can become stressed and frustrated. And, while human-reindeer interactions can be positive, if harsh, outdated training methods are used reindeer can become fearful and defensive. The negative impact on their welfare will be exacerbated if they cannot follow their instinctive avoidance or evasive behaviours.

## Overall welfare state

Reindeer are harder to keep healthy and well in captivity than similar species, mainly because it is difficult to replicate certain aspects of their wild nutrition and environment that are crucial for their well-being. However, the proactive and knowledgeable management of reindeer in more natural environments, such as the Cairngorm reindeer herd, presents more opportunities for positive welfare.



# AT EVENTS

## Nutrition

Reindeer are very sensitive to sudden changes in diet and forage restriction, as may occur during transport and at events and can lead to sometimes severe digestive conditions and even death. Additionally, stress can mean that reindeer do not eat and drink normally.

## Physical environment

The physical environment of Christmas events, including transportation to the event, is drastically distinct from both the natural habitat and home environment of captive reindeer.

Reindeer may be confined to small and unfamiliar spaces, and exposed to warm temperatures, unsuitable flooring, noise, lights, and large crowds, with limited access to

their preferred social group, food, water, and shelter. This environment does not allow for the expression of natural behaviours, including regular consumption of forage and preferred social behaviours.

This environment is particularly challenging for reindeer welfare due to the high number of potentially threatening stimuli. As prey animals who form herds, reindeer are highly fearful and vigilant, allowing them to detect and respond to threats to survival. Constant fear and vigilance will contribute to an overall status of poor welfare. These negative consequences can be mitigated to some extent through training and habituation to try to accustom reindeer to some of the stimuli. However, this is unlikely to be enough to create positive welfare.





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## Health

Long-distance travel, repeated loading and unloading, as well as the pulling of Santa's sleigh can cause physical and mental fatigue. There is also an increased risk of injury and disease in such environments, and the stress caused by transportation and events could compromise immune system function, making reindeer more susceptible to disease and infection.

## Behavioural interactions

During events reindeer have limited opportunities for behavioural interactions that meet their needs. Also, as described on the previous page, the event environment contains many stimuli that might be perceived as threats. Whilst reindeer may express vigilance in response to perceived threats in the event environment, they have limited agency to react as they normally would in response to a threat, causing fear. Further, the constant, unfamiliar and unpredictable interaction with the public through petting and feeding has the potential to be stressful for the reindeer.

Although it has yet to be studied in reindeer, there is the potential that this lack of agency and exposure to unrelenting stressors may lead to the development of learned helplessness, a coping mechanism which, as the name suggests, leads to decreased motivation, interest and responsiveness, and an appearance of passivity.

## Overall welfare state

There are many steps that can be taken to try to reduce the negative impact that transport and events have on reindeer welfare. These include minimising noise, lights, and contact with large crowds; providing rest periods; giving reindeer sufficient training using positive science-based methods to accustom them to potential stressors; and ensuring handlers are knowledgeable and empathetic.

However, even when all precautions are taken, it is unlikely that this experience fosters a positive mental state in reindeer. In particular, the unnatural environment and lack of agency associated with these events are likely to lead to psychological distress and a state of poor welfare.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish a reindeer welfare stakeholder group in the UK, to develop guidelines and direct further research for the keeping of reindeer in captive conditions in the UK.
2. Broaden the research base and develop a tool to assess reindeer welfare. The starkest finding from this review was the lack of research on the mental state domain, considering that it is the subjective state of the individual which ultimately determines an animal's welfare. Further research should place a primary focus on the emotional and cognitive function of captive reindeer populations in the UK. This research can then inform the development of a welfare assessment tool.
3. Cease the use of reindeer in entertainment events. The use of reindeer in Christmas events, often involving travel, exposure to crowds, and unfamiliar settings, raises significant welfare concerns. Ultimately it is the lack of ability of reindeer to act with agency that compromises their welfare.