



Why the recognition of sentience is so important for animal welfare

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Commentary on Rowan et al. on Sentience Politics

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Abstract: Rowan et al. (2022) provide a useful summary of the history and development of the philosophical, public, and legal recognition of animal sentience and its importance in improving the welfare of animals. Here I argue for the incorporation of the precautionary principle in sentience recognition, and the wider significance of sentience recognition to the current climate, biodiversity and human health crises.

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1. Sentience recognition. The target article is an important summary of the history of thinking on animal sentience, the role it has played in the development of animal welfare science, and ongoing efforts to incorporate the recognition of animal sentience into legislation and public policy.

Understanding the history of thinking on animal sentience is important for organisations and individuals working to improve animal welfare. As far back as the 1960s the Brambell Committee realised that an understanding of sentience is an essential part of assessing animal welfare (Brambell 1965). Animal welfare science can help guide the specifics of legislation and policy, but the human-animal relationship is defined by our increasing recognition that most animals have awareness and aspirations, experience a wide range of emotions, and can suffer, both physically and otherwise. Although there are still some dissenters, animal sentience is increasingly recognised and accepted by a growing proportion of society. Its recognition in law is a vital step towards improving welfare, which requires a government-wide approach to animal welfare ([RSPCA](#)).

2. The precautionary principle. As Rowan et al. point out, proving empirically that a particular species is sentient is difficult if not impossible to do with certainty, but the precautionary principle – to give the benefit of the doubt because of the consequences of error -- is embedded in many aspects of national and international regulation and policy (Gollier & Treich 2013; Birch 2017). On the question of where in phylogenesis sentience emerges, the UK has recently adopted its [Animal Welfare \(Sentience\) Act](#) (2022) recognising all vertebrates, cephalopods and decapod crustaceans as sentient. As further evidence emerges, other invertebrate taxa may need to be added, although the precautionary approach could also be construed as implying that we should consider all animals at least potentially sentient until proven otherwise.

3. Evaluating animal welfare. Rowan et al. suggest that pain is probably responsible for a bigger reduction in welfare than any other stimulus or state. Human studies, however, tell us that whereas intense or prolonged pain can certainly result in negative mental states, many other causes of depression can be felt as intense suffering. This is almost certainly true in other sentient animals, too, who may suffer intensely, for example, from physical or social deprivation, as when animals confined or restricted for prolonged periods develop behavioural stereotypies (Mason and Rushen 2006).

Rowan et al. also describe welfare as being more than just the absence of suffering. The concepts of ‘a good life’ and ‘a life worth living’ are important considerations in the provision of environments designed to provide good welfare, although these concepts themselves are the subject of much debate (Bekoff 2016).

4. The wider significance of recognising sentience. Legal recognition of animal sentience could also have policy significance for biodiversity protection and other crises of our time, including climate change and pandemic risk. The increasing industrialisation of animal agriculture has been identified as a major contributor to greenhouse gases (Grossi et al. 2019). The physical, metabolic and psychological stresses endured by farm animals, and by wild animals in trade, will certainly also increase the risk of pathogen emergence, proliferation, and transfer between species -- including, potentially, our own (Magouras et al. 2020, Stel et al. 2022). The recognition of animal sentience calls for improving animal welfare, eliminating high-risk practices and intensive animal farming. This could help make the world less prone to catastrophic climate change and future pandemics. It could also help phase out the demand for animal products that involve cruel practices (Wiebers & Feigin 2020).

Rowan et al. also allude to the power of campaigning, which can result in changes in public opinion, legislation, and policy over time. Examples have been the banning of veal crates in the UK and European Union (EU), and the recognition of sentience in EU treaty text in the late 1990s. The latter has precipitated the recognition of animal sentience by other jurisdictions. The [UK Animal Welfare \(Sentience\) Act 2022](#), which reinstated animal sentience in UK law following the UK’s departure from the EU, goes further in extending sentience recognition to certain invertebrate taxa (Crump et al. 2022), and in establishing an [Animal Sentience Committee](#) to hold Ministers to account.

An important effect of the legal recognition of sentience has been the increase in penalties for animal welfare-related offences, for example, in Colombia (Contreras 2016) and the UK. These examples could drive change in other jurisdictions by acting as a carrot for campaigners, and a stick to be applied, for example, to trade deals with other countries. As Rowan et al. point out in their conclusions, the legal recognition of sentience, although it may not have a direct effect on the way animals are treated, provides a vital platform for progressive change that could have far reaching consequences.

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