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Wild animal welfare

Commentary on [Rowan et al.](#) on *Sentience Politics*

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Abstract: Rowan et al's article provides an overview of developments in the science of animal sentience and its links to animal welfare policy, especially regarding farm animals. But changing ideas of animal sentience and welfare are also important for managing wild and other free-living animals. We ask how the welfare of these animals differs from that of farmed animals, especially how the ability to make autonomous choices may matter. We suggest that more research into wild animal welfare is needed to make informed policy decisions, for example, about using animals in rewilding projects and choosing between policies of culling and fertility control.

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Rowan et al (2022) provide a helpful overview of key developments in the science of animal sentience and its influence on animal welfare policy. The focus of their discussion, though, is relatively narrow -- almost exclusively the sentience and welfare of farm animals. In his commentary, Brown (2022) extends Rowan et al's discussion to talk about fishing (although primarily in the context of aquaculture). However, the changing policy significance of animal sentience and animal welfare raises questions about other groups of animals, in particular animals that are wild and free living or at least under more limited human control than typical farm animals.

Rowan et al. show clearly how the notion of animal welfare has developed over time, moving from a focus on avoiding physical pain, to including other forms of suffering (such as boredom and frustration) and then, most recently, to ideas of positive welfare. They discuss ways of assessing welfare, including preference tests and seeing how hard animals will “work” to obtain things they want. This discussion, however, is framed in terms of the welfare of farm and laboratory animals to whom resources are provided by their human caretakers. What are the implications for the welfare of more-or-less free-living animals?

We accept the basic premise affirmed by Rowan et al that welfare rests on animals’ positive and negative experiences, irrespective of how and where they live. However, free living animals clearly face conditions very different from those of farm animals. Farmed pigs and cattle, for instance, are generally under tight human control, with a number of behavioral constraints. However, alongside these constraints, much of the time they are guaranteed enough food, shelter and veterinary care. Typically, free-living animals have no guarantee of food or shelter, and no veterinary care. But they live relatively autonomously and can make at least some choices with respect to conspecifics, mates, raising offspring, daily activities and moving around. This may affect what actually matters to them.

For example, what’s good for the welfare of an unowned, unsocialized (feral) cat in terms of free living and association is very different from what’s good for an owned indoor cat, even though these are members of the same species (perhaps even the same family). And there may be compensating factors with respect to the hardships of free-living animal existence. It is possible, for example, that animals gain positive experiences from making some of their own choices and not being under strict human control; the exercise of autonomy may be pleasurable or valuable (Browning and Veit 2021: 1148).

This is an issue of great importance, for example, in so-called rewilding projects where horses and cattle are introduced to nature reserves to provide ecological functions. The life of these cattle and horses will include periods of food shortage, typically during winter, where the animals lose weight. The animals should be able to adapt (provided that they do not face genuine starvation which, of course, constitutes suffering and a severe welfare compromise), but how does this hunger affect their subjective welfare? Is a calorie-restricted free-living horse, free to seek what limited food is available, better off than a farmed calorie-restricted sow with no other options than biting the bars of her enclosure (Sandøe et al 2022)? At the moment, we don’t know much about the answers to these kinds of questions. Does this matter?

In some cases, we don’t need to know more to see that there’s a welfare problem. In England, the Glue Traps Offences Act (2022) has banned the use of glue traps; but they remain available in most countries of the world. We know enough to say that starving to death in a glue trap, chewing off limbs, or just being stuck and terrified, is bad welfare for a mouse.

But there are other cases where assumptions are made about what’s good or bad for wild animal welfare without there being much supporting evidence. (Indeed, Rowan et al begin their paper by taking the decline of wild animal populations to mean that the ‘lot of animals’ in terms of welfare has diminished. But the decline of populations doesn’t tell us anything about the individuals’ welfare in those populations; individual welfare might have improved due to less competition over resources!)

Some management decisions regarding free-living animals depend, at least in part, on knowledge about animal welfare. For example: the management of deer populations is a

growing issue in countries across the world. Two leading options are culling and pharmaceutical fertility control. The latter is frequently defended on the grounds of animal welfare: that it's better for deer to prevent them conceiving or to stop their fertility cycles altogether, than it is to kill them. But these claims are based on very little knowledge about the impacts of these alternatives on deer welfare as actually experienced. Being unable to reproduce may deprive does of a significant amount of positive welfare; and we know very little about the welfare impacts of changed structures of deer groups, either from hunting adults or from failure to produce offspring (Gamborg et al 2021). In order to judge which policy is better for welfare, we need more welfare research.

For these reasons, there is also much less agreement about what constitutes progress in animal welfare when managing potentially or actually free-living animals. Although it is hard to disagree that providing farm animals with more space or with more enrichment provides better welfare, there's room for considerable disagreement about whether (for example) it is better for domestic cats to live wholly indoors or to have free access to an outdoor life, or whether use of contraception or targeted culls is a better alternative for the welfare of hyperabundant white-tailed deer.

As wildlife conservation and management becomes more interventionist – for example, by translocating wild animal populations to new locations as a way of responding to a changing climate – knowing more about the welfare of free-living animals becomes more pressing. All of this means that the next development in research on animal sentience should go beyond the farmed animals that are the focus of Rowan et al's paper, to include the development of the science of welfare biology, first proposed by Ng in 1995.

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