

Time to stop pretending we don't know other animals are sentient beings

By [Marc Bekoff, Animal Sentience](#)

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Animal sentience isn't science fiction. It's not anti-science to say we must use what we know on behalf of other animals and must stop pretending we need more data.

It's time for more action given what we know about animal sentience. The target article (Rowan et al. 2022), by world-renowned experts, is an excellent summary of what we know and don't know about sentience in nonhuman animals (henceforth "animals"). I would have liked to see a bit more coverage of the ethological literature, especially on what are called "positive emotions," as in the work of Jonathan Balcombe (2007) on pleasure.



[Marc and his friend Genevieve, a clearly sentient rescued pig]

But even given the literature the authors cover, it's clear we already *know* that numerous animals other than ourselves are sentient beings. We also know they get bored, suffer immeasurably when their bodies are mutilated and their lives compromised by being forced to live in horrific conditions of captivity "in the name of humans," when their children are ripped away from them to make more meat or milk or cheese, or when they're severely abused to entertain us, or they are used for terribly invasive research in captivity and in the field, including conservation projects in which individuals are intentionally killed "in the name of conservation" or "in the name of coexistence." The real question is not *whether* sentience has evolved, but *why*.

We also know already that animals feel pleasure and like to experience certain activities such as being free to move about and interact with friends and other animals, to play, and to feel safe (Bekoff 2007, 2010; Pierce and Bekoff 2017). If they didn't enjoy doing these and other things, they wouldn't seek them out and do them.

I know some people will respond with something like, "We really don't *know* whether pigs don't like their tails being cut off or being castrated" or "We need more data to know that animals get really bored or enjoy play." However, we *do* know it and it's high time to recognize that this sort of skepticism is unwarranted -- and responsible for widespread and continued abuse, given the evidential database we *now* have.

Rowan et al. on *Sentience Politics* Rowan et al. (2022) also rightly note:

“So far, however, there has been little evidence that the various declarations that animals are sentient in other countries and regions have had much direct impact on animal protection legislation or on how animals are actually being treated. Nevertheless, it is very unlikely that incorporating animal sentience language in legislation would be harmful to the interests of animals in any way.”

The authors are right on the mark. For example (Bekoff, 2021), in December 2021 the Spanish Congress of Deputies declared that nonhuman animals, including household companions and members of wild species, are sentient beings. For those who don't know what this means, it's worth quoting from "[Spain approves new law recognizing animals as 'sentient beings'](#)":

“Animals in Spain will no longer be considered as ‘objects’ by the law thanks to new legislation passed on Thursday by Spain’s lower house, the Congress of Deputies. From now on, animals will be treated as ‘sentient beings,’ and as such will have a different legal standing than an inanimate object. They will no longer be able to be seized, abandoned, mistreated or separated from one of their owners in the case of a divorce or separation, without having their wellbeing and protection taken into account.”

Whereas this is surely a move in the right direction, I'm not very optimistic that it will make a huge difference unless people get out and actively work to change how these animals, now formally recognized as being sentient, are actually treated. This includes people who work with these animals directly and indirectly. Also, although bullfighting has been banned in certain locations, it has not been banned countrywide in Spain, and we can only hope it will be banned now that bulls and other nonhuman beings are recognized as sentient beings. In New Zealand, where animals have likewise now been declared to be sentient, that country's [war on wildlife](#) is a brutal and reprehensible assault on the lives of countless sentient and other nonhuman beings under the name of “invasive pest-control.”

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The list of the continuing mistreatment of animals both in places where they have been formally recognized to be sentient, feeling beings and elsewhere in the world goes on and on. Declaring nonhumans to be sentient beings is surely most welcome, but for now it's more of a “feel good” move, just another instance of humane-washing. The science of animal welfare needs to pay attention to what we know—that animals *are* sentient—and also needs to *act* on the fact that the life of every single *individual* matters. This is why Jessica Pierce and I (2017) called for replacing the science of animal welfare with the science of animal well-being in which the life of every single individual is protected. [Compassionate conservation](#) also stresses the value of all individuals, wild and captive (Wallach et al. 2018; Batavia et al. 2021).

The abundant scientific database that already exists—a body of evidence that has been available for a long time and just keeps growing—supports the obvious fact that there exist many species of nonhuman organisms on our planet who are undeniably sentient; deeply feeling, emotional beings who care about what happens to themselves and to others. The *fact* of sentience needs to be put to use, and into practice, to protect and respect the lives of the other animals with whom our species interacts in so many ways.

We must stop pretending that we don't know this-or-that about animal sentience. We need more action. While we persist in pondering the obvious, ignoring what we already know and have long known, countless nonhuman victims are continuing to be abused by humankind, every minute of every day, planet-wide. Future human generations will surely look back and wonder how our species, with its

undeniable historic legacy of sincere, successful, and continuing struggle against the abuse of humans by other humans, could have kept shamefully failing to use the science, history, and politics of sentience to protect sentient nonhumankind from ourselves.

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