

Does Manx law need an amendment to recognise the sentience or intelligence of some animals or not? If so, what should legal recognition actually amount to - is octopus off the menu?

What can sentience be defined as? *Animal Equality* defines this concept as 'the ability to feel sensations and emotions'. There has been a myriad of research aiming to prove that animals too have the capacity to experience this with the aim to change laws regarding the ethical treatment of animals. The basis of the movement relies on the acknowledgement of sentience in order to argue effectively the cruelty of animal treatment. This is not simply the ability to feel pain but the capacity to feel a plethora of emotions including distress, pleasure, and joy. Through the increasing exposure of many exploitative and abusive practices that are combined with other factors (such as a push for climate awareness and significant global recognition for animal sentience specifically shown through the Animal Sentience Bill), it is no wonder that there is a push for legal acknowledgement on the island. But to what extent should the law protect animals, and how can we measure sentience whilst controlling the implications this has on society's view of sentience, not only in animals but in human beings too?

The island's current stance is as follows: the few aspects of the UK Animal Welfare Bill that were considered (regarding 'companion animals') have been rejected but the Animal Wildlife Act is in the process of being reviewed which aims to extend protection for 'kept' animals, including cats, dogs and horses. So what is the basis behind protecting certain animals from mistreatment, whilst allowing it in others? Clearly, the government has no interest in imposing the collective protection of vertebrae and select invertebrate animals, thereby disregarding their well-researched capacity for sentience. Is it not hypocritical to overtly punish mistreatment of 'kept' animals whilst simultaneously allowing the monetisation of slaughtered animals that are deemed socially acceptable to eat, who hold arguably the similar if not the same level of sentience?

So why has the Island's government so hastily thrown out the few aspects of the UK Animal Welfare Bill it has considered? The legal recognition of all vertebrates and some invertebrates as sentient would be a massive step forward by having animal welfare recognised in future decision making. However, this does not tackle the whole issue regarding the treatment of animals as it would require a review of current laws under the legislation of this bill. What power does the legal recognition of animal sentience have if we don't implement it? The Animal Welfare Bill is not an easy fix, but the government's response should not be to disregard it completely.

Outside of the Isle of Man, there is significant support for the legal protection of sentient animals. An official petition to the UK Government gathered over 100,000 signatures from residents, resulting in a debate for animal sentience in the House of Commons in 2021. Research arose around the same time that led to an amendment by the Government to include cephalopods (such as octopus) and decapods (such as lobsters and crabs) in the definition of animals that are sentient. Having been so forward-thinking as a government in recent years,

it is disappointing that in this instance there is such disregard for a significant change that is pushed forward by a larger social movement.

If sentience is used as the basis for the argument for further protection of animals we need to acknowledge how we view this as a society. Each country has distinctive cultural biases that make our regard for sentience unreliable. Why do we view some as more unethical to kill or eat regardless of their sentience? An octopus is proven to be highly intelligent, more so than a dog. Arguably a pig is just as sentient as a horse. We need to face a common truth: that it is the society we grow up in that shapes how we view animals for consumption. Some people keep the animals that we consume and see how they live and their personalities develop as a result. In some homes, pigs are even kept as pets. How will the Animal Welfare Act make room for this?

Perhaps we are placing too much significance on sentience alone. Why should animals require proof of sentience in order to garner legal protection? Does an animal have to be sentient to deserve rights? We do not view humans this same way, whereby only sentience gives value to life. We need to acknowledge that we view animals as inherently inferior to humans who hold (from our perspective/ knowledge) the most sentience out of any animal, but does this mean we deserve the most legal protection? It would not be an exaggeration to say that moving forward with legal protection of all (by the definition put forward) sentient animals would require a reform of the set current legislation and this would require a great deal of commitment to change. Arguably there are more pressing matters to do with human rights that need focusing on first, but does this statement just enforce our apparent superiority over animals?

Animals can feel and therefore they can suffer. What is the aim of the law? To protect those who cannot speak for themselves? Animals have little autonomy in our world and rely on those in places of power to fight the moral fight for them. This bill would force many to acknowledge uncomfortable truths about what we are partaking in. The fight for recognition of animal sentience is as much of a moral fight as it is an ethical one. We cannot continue to look out simply for ourselves, this is becoming increasingly clear as climate change becomes more topical. We hold autonomy and responsibility for our actions. As it stands, no other animal on this planet has the ability to carry out intentionally good acts. It would be unrealistic to fully stop the killing of animals, regardless of their sentience, but perhaps this should not be the aim. Should we resign to the fact that this is outside of our control, and instead of asking how we can stop this, ask how we can make it more humane? The Isle of Man prides itself on holding the oldest uninterrupted democratic parliament in the world, providing pioneering political decisions regardless of our English counterparts. I believe the recognition of animal sentience should be revisited because globally this is the move forward.