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Sentience, welfare, ethics and human entertainment

Donald M. Broom

Department of Veterinary Medicine, University of Cambridge, Madingley Road, Cambridge CB3 0ES, U.K. and St Catharine's College. dmb16@cam.ac.uk

It has sometimes been thought acceptable to watch gladiators fighting, as long as they are slaves, to laugh at shows involving physically deformed and mentally subnormal people, and to remove livelihoods and dwellings to make way for modern developments as long as the people concerned are poor or black. There are various parallels when non-human animals are used for, or affected by, human entertainment activities. These issues raise questions about which individuals and communities have value and deserve respect. It has been written that God gave us dominion over the world but does "us" just mean humans and what should dominion mean? Is it right to focus greatly on humans when terms like health and welfare mean exactly the same for humans and other animals? Which humans and which other animals are sentient and to what extent does the answer matter?

Sentience means that the individual has the capacity to have feelings. A sentient being is one that, in order to have feelings, has some ability: to evaluate the actions of others in relation to itself and third parties, to remember some of its own actions and their consequences, to assess risks and benefits and to have some degree of awareness^{1,2}. Recent advances in our knowledge of the complex nature of the behaviour, physiology and neurobiology of all vertebrate and some invertebrate animals tell us that their behaviour is far from just reflexive so they are sentient and have the ability to experience pain and other positive and negative feelings. For example, all fish have sophisticated learning abilities and almost all abilities reported for primates can also be found in fish³. The area of the brain that processes emotional function in fish may be the medial and lateral telencephalic pallium or the habenula instead of the equivalent mammalian region but it is the complexity of brain function that is the scientific issue, not the anatomical area^{4,5}. When deciding which animals should have legislative protection the question of sentience and indeed whether an animal can suffer is a key factor.

If we know that sheep can recognise individual sheep and people and remember them for over a year, several mammals and birds can learn what is in a mirror, some birds and fish can alter their behaviour as they predict what is likely to happen in the future, some spiders can remember an evaluation and use the information later, does this alter our treatment of such animals?

Animals are among the most sought after tourist attractions and the impact on them is a matter of concern to an increasing number of people. Tourists and other people may chase wild animals with packs of dogs, shoot them accurately or inaccurately with guns, catch them on hooks or with harpoons, watch them in circuses or zoos, disturb them to varying extents in order to see them in their home environment or cause them to be caught in order that they can be kept as pets. The impacts on animal welfare of all of these human impacts can be scientifically measured. Another impact of tourism is the killing of many animals in case the tourists do not want to encounter them in their hotel room, swimming pool, etc. People

seeking entertainment that involves or affects animals should know the impact on the welfare of those animals and consider whether or not it is morally acceptable⁶.

References

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⁶Carr, N. and Broom, D.M. 2018. *Tourism and Animal Welfare*. (pp 188). Wallingford: CABI.