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ANIMALS ARE CONSCIOUS AND SHOULD BE TREATED AS SUCH

Now that scientists have belatedly declared that mammals, birds and many other animals are conscious, it is time for society to act

By Marc Bekoff

Marc Bekoff is an emeritus professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He has written many essays and books about animal emotions, animal consciousness and animal protection

ARE animals conscious? This question has a long and venerable history. Charles Darwin asked it when pondering the evolution of consciousness. His ideas about evolutionary continuity – that differences between species are differences in degree rather than kind – lead to a firm conclusion that if we have something, “they” (other animals) have it too.

In July of this year, the question was discussed in detail by a group of scientists gathered at the University of Cambridge for the first annual Francis Crick Memorial Conference. Crick, co-discoverer of DNA, spent the latter part of his career studying consciousness and in 1994 published a book about it, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The scientific search for the soul*.

The upshot of the meeting was the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, which was publicly proclaimed by three eminent neuroscientists, David Edelman of the Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla, California, Philip Low of Stanford University and Christof Koch of the California Institute of Technology.

The declaration concludes that “non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors. Consequently, the weight of evidence

indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Non-human animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates.”

My first take on the declaration was incredulity. Did we really need this statement of the obvious? Many renowned researchers reached the same conclusion years ago.

The declaration also contains some omissions. All but one of the signatories are lab researchers; the declaration would have benefited from perspectives from researchers who have done long-term studies of wild animals, including nonhuman primates, social carnivores, cetaceans, rodents and birds.

I was also disappointed that the declaration did not include fish, because the evidence supporting consciousness in this group of vertebrates is also compelling.

Nevertheless, we should applaud them for doing this. The declaration is not aimed at scientists: as its author, Low, said prior to the declaration: “We came to a consensus that now was perhaps the time to make a statement for the public... It might be obvious to everybody in this room that animals have consciousness; it is not obvious to the rest of the world.”

The important question now is: will this declaration make a difference? What are these scientists and others going to do now that they agree that consciousness is widespread in the animal kingdom?

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ANIMALS ARE CONSCIOUS AND SHOULD BE TREATED AS SUCH CONTINUED

I hope the declaration will be used to protect animals from being treated abusively and inhumanely. All too often, sound scientific knowledge about animal cognition, emotions and consciousness is not recognised in animal welfare laws. We know, for example, that mice, rats and chickens display empathy, but this knowledge has not been factored into the US Federal Animal Welfare Act. Around 25 million of these animals, including fish, are used in invasive research each year. They account for more than 95 per cent of animals used in research in the US. I'm constantly astounded that those who decide on regulations on animal use have ignored these data.

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Not all legislation ignores the science. The European Union's Treaty of Lisbon, which came into force on 1 December 2009, recognises that animals are sentient beings and calls on member states to “pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals” in agriculture, fisheries, transport, research and development and space policies.

There are still scientific sceptics about animal consciousness. In his book, Crick wrote “it is sentimental to idealize animals” and that for many animals life in captivity is better, longer and less brutal than life in the wild.

Similar views still prevail in some quarters. In her recent book *Why Animals Matter: Animal consciousness, animal welfare, and human well-being*, Marian Stamp Dawkins at the University of Oxford claims we still don't really know if other animals are conscious and that we should “remain skeptical and agnostic... Militantly agnostic if necessary.”

Dawkins inexplicably ignores the data that those at the meeting used to formulate their declaration, and goes so far as to claim that it is actually harmful to animals to base welfare decisions on their being conscious.



I consider this irresponsible. Those who choose to harm animals can easily use Dawkins's position to justify their actions. Perhaps given the conclusions of the Cambridge gathering, what I call “Dawkins's Dangerous Idea” will finally be shelved. I don't see how anyone who keeps abreast of the literature on animal pain, sentience and consciousness – and has worked closely with any of a wide array of animals – could remain sceptical and agnostic about whether they are conscious.

Let us applaud the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness and work hard to get animals the protection they deserve. And let us hope that the declaration is not simply a grandstanding gesture but rather something with teeth, something that leads to action. We should all take this opportunity to stop the abuse of millions upon millions of conscious animals in the name of science, education, food, clothing and entertainment. We owe it to them to use what we know on their behalf and to factor compassion and empathy into our treatment of them.