

**It's Time To Stop Wondering if Animals Are Sentient—They Are**  
From [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions](#)  
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*Is it anti-science to claim that nonhumans aren't sentient?*



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An essay titled "[Animal sentience: history, science, and politics](#)" by Andrew Rowan and his colleagues is an excellent state-of-the-art summary of what we know and don't know about sentience in nonhuman animals (animals). Nonetheless, I would have liked to see a bit more coverage of the ethological literature and consideration of what is called "positive emotions," as in the work of Jonathan Balcombe on pleasure.

It always amazes me that some people, typically academics, are quick to acknowledge that nonhumans feel certain negative emotions but remain agnostic about, or reject the possibility of, whether they also feel positive emotions. How could they not, given what we know about animal sentience and [animal behavior](#)?<sup>1</sup>

It's clear we know that numerous animals other than ourselves are [sentient](#) beings, and a [shift](#) in attitudes is in progress. Given what we know about animal sentience, it's time for more action—to use what we know on behalf of other animals.

We 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.

We also continue to use numerous animals in 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." We also know that animals feel pleasure and like to experience certain activities such as being free to move about and interact with friends and other animals, play, and feel safe. If they didn't enjoy doing these and other things, they wouldn't seek them out.

## **The real question is not whether sentience has evolved but why.**

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 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 and his co-authors also noted:

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 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, in December 2021, the Spanish Congress of Deputies declared that nonhuman animals, including household companions and members of wild species, are sentient beings.<sup>2</sup> 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 assault on the lives of countless sentient and other nonhuman beings under the name of “invasive pest-control.”

## **Animal sentience isn’t science fiction.**

It’s [anti-science](#) to claim that nonhumans aren’t sentient. 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. The list of the continuing mistreatment of animals in places where they have been formally recognized as sentient 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, 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 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 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 others. The *fact* of sentience needs to be put to use and into practice to protect and respect the lives of the other animals our species interact with in so many ways.  
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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 continue to be abused by humankind, every minute of every day, planet-wide.

I asked 100 people, some of whom are academics, "Do you think that animals are sentient—do you think they feel different emotions such as pleasure and pain?" Ninety-seven said "yes," and three said something like, "I'm not sure, but I can't imagine they don't." All said we must give nonhumans the benefit of the doubt and were incredulous that abusive research continued as if it were perfectly okay to harm animals to benefit us.

Future human generations will surely look back and wonder how we could have kept shamefully failing to use the science, history, and [politics](#) of sentience to protect sentient non-humankind from ourselves. At the very least, the [Five Freedoms](#) developed by Britain's Farm Animal Welfare Council to protect "food animals" were passed in 1965.

We can, and we must do better. Solid science, evolutionary biology, comparative psychology, and a dose of common sense can lead the way. Surely, it's time to stop wondering if other animals are sentient—they clearly are.