

Animal sentience – why it should matter to you as an animal protectionist

(presentation workshop 2008)

How many times have you heard the following?

You work for animals?
You're crazy!
They are "just animals!"

Sometimes even our families ask us these questions. What do you think they mean when they say "just animals!"? Mostly they mean that animals lack the ability to feel or think so do not deserve our care and protection. Many of you work with dogs and cats. Do you think these animals can be happy or sad? If so, how do you know? What would you say to people who make this kind of remark?

We have to understand that the way people think about animals is influenced by their upbringing, education and fashion of their time. It is our job to educate ourselves and others on why animals deserve our care and protection. It is not common sense.

Since many of you are familiar with dogs and cats, we are going to look at whether other kinds of animals actually can feel like the animals you work with everyday.

Animals are sentient. But what is animal sentience?

Animals are aware of

- how they feel
- where they are
- who they are with
- how they are treated

What can animals feel?

- Pain
- Other sensations such as hunger, thirst, heat, cold
- Fear, anxiety, stress as well as positive emotions
- Frustration of natural behaviour
- Pleasure and play
- Social bonds

Sentience is not simply about humans attributing human emotions to animals. There is an increasing amount of scientific research on sentience. In 2005 a conference was held in the UK on animal sentience by Compassion in World Farming Trust. Never before had such a conference been held on such a large and international scale. Speakers included prominent scientists and leading professors in ethology, agriculture, conservation, government policy, law, philosophy and ethics.

How much do we know about animal sentience and cognition? Let us look at the following statements:

- Chickens have personalities

True. Chickens form complex social hierarchies called the "pecking order". Every chicken knows his or her place on the social ladder and remembers the faces and ranks of more than 100 other birds. Each bird has a different personality that often relates to his or her place in the pecking order. Some are sociable and fearless; others are shy and watchful.

- Chickens and eggs can "talk" to each other

True! Chickens have strong family ties. Chickens are very devoted mothers. They softly cluck to their unborn chickens which chirp back to her and to one another from inside their shells. The mother teaches her chicks how to eat, drink and even avoid enemies!

- Chickens have small brains and therefore not much intelligence.

False. Chickens can be more intelligent than young children! Dr. Chris Evans, Professor of Psychology at Macquarie University, Australia, says that, in a more advanced way than young children, chickens have the ability to understand that an object, when taken away, and hidden, still continues to exist. They understand cause and effect relationships.



- Pigs have fun being dirty.

False. Pigs are clean animals. When given the choice, will not excrete waste near their living or eating areas. When you see pictures of pigs in mud, understand that they use the mud baths to keep cool, not because they are dirty.

- Dogs are more intelligent than pigs.

False. Pigs have been found to be equal or superior to dogs in intelligence. Professor Donald Broom from the University of Cambridge adds that a pig's cognitive ability is certainly more advanced than that of a three year old child.

- Cows are solitary animals.

False. Scientists have found that cattle have the mental abilities to nurture friendships. Cattle in a small herd will join with up to three other animals to form a small group of friends. They will spend most of their time together, frequently grooming and licking each other. They don't like other cattle who are not part of their group.

- Elephants move on quickly when one of them dies.

False. Elephants mourn their dead and can shed tears of grief. They even make graves by breaking branches to cover the dead.

It is not only in humans that traits such as intelligence, confidence and experience help to determine who moves up the social hierarchy. Researchers in France found out that cattle move up the hierarchy because of such traits. Cattle live in hierarchically ranked groups and begin to order themselves at a young age. Physical communication and grooming help to establish this social ranking. For example, head-butting and shoving determine which animals are more dominant.

What about fish? Fish and other sea creatures are often misunderstood. Many people think they cannot feel pain and suffering and are not intelligent. However, research has found that they:

- Are intelligent
- Can use tools
- Have long-term memories
- Live in complex social structures
- Feel pain like birds and mammals.

Despite knowing all this, humans continue to abuse animals in so many ways, including for meat, entertainment, fur, medicine and experiments.

Animal protection groups need to know about animal sentience as it affects our treatment of and responsibility towards animals. Given this knowledge of animal sentience, what can we do?

As individuals you could:

- Reduce consumption of animals. This is a personal and powerful choice that each of us can make. Farm animals are the most widely abused animals in the world and we can make a difference to them every day. Some people can reduce or give up meat easily but some need more support. There are Chinese resources on this topic if you need them.
- Use herbal alternatives to animal-based Chinese medicines. Many Chinese medicine doctors have come forward to say that herbal alternatives to ingredients such as bear bile work just as well.
- Support animal-free fashion (no fur, ivory, etc). There are many alternatives to fur and other animal products such as ivory.
- Use products not tested on animals where available. There are lists of international brands of cosmetics and skincare not tested on animals on the internet.
- Patronise animal-free entertainment (no zoos, animal shows).

As groups, you could:

- Take sentience into consideration when doing any work with animals. When rescuing or looking after animals, don't assume you know what is best. Learn about what those animals need for wellbeing in terms of space, access to food and water, exercise, etc. Educate yourself through useful resources.
- Integrate information on animal sentience into educational work. Where appropriate to your existing work, include information on animal sentience when presenting information to the public, media, authorities, etc. Don't assume that people have this knowledge even about dogs and cats. Help people understand that although animals look very different from us, they may not be so different after all.
- As leaders of animal welfare groups, you could learn more about animal cruelty issues new to you.
- Think about taking on projects on animal issues that are important in China but new to you.

