



#### THE STICKY WELFARE WICKET

# Did you dress your dog for dinner?

Let's take Fido—in most households in the United States, Fido is considered a member of the family—he may sleep on the bed, have nicer clothes than his person, consume specialty food, and receive excellent preventative health care. Dogs like Fido provide companionship, therapy, and socialization and are involved in police and military work, search and rescue, detection of drugs, mines, bombs, and contraband food. But move Fido to East Asia, and Fido may be served on a platter for dinner. In Islamic communities, Fido historically would be considered unclean.

For the Maasai, cattle are considered everything: food, material, culture, ritual. The Maasai greeting is “I hope your cattle are well.” In India, the cow is greatly revered by Hindus and is regarded as sacred. Mahatma Gandhi said “If someone were to ask me what the most important outward manifestation of Hinduism was, I would suggest that it was the idea of cow protec-

tion.” Killing cows is banned in India and no Hindu would eat any beef product. In the U.S. cattle are raised primarily for food—meat and milk.

In the U.S., “Flipper” was the aquatic version of “Lassie”—always saving his human from peril at just the right moment. For a price, in various places around the world you can have a “therapeutic encounter” with dolphins, swim with captive dolphins, kayak to view dolphins in the wild, or view their athletic feats at a show. Dolphins are used by the U.S. military to locate and tag mines and identify and tag enemy swimmers. In some tribes of the Solomon Islands, dolphin harvesting, catching, eating, and use of the teeth as ornaments is considered a valuable and inherent part of their culture and tradition.

Culture changes the fortune or misfortune of the animal, but culture does not change the physiology of the animal. The U.S. companion animal Fido and the East Asia main course Fido have the same neural system, the same ability to feel pain, stress, and frustration. In general, animals that provide pleasure, comfort, or companionship to humans are treated better and regarded with more respect than those reared for food, so it is likely that Fido the member of a U.S. family has better chance to have a “life worth living” than Fido of East Asia.

In 1997 the European Union added the concept of “animal sentience” into basic law. The legally-binding protocol annexed to the Treaty of Amsterdam recognizes that animals are ‘sentient beings’, and requires the EU and its members to “pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals.” The dictionary defines ‘sentience’ as the power of sense, perception or sensation, or consciousness. What the law says is that it matters to them (the animals) how we treat them because they are sentient, capable of feeling pain and of suffering.

Darwin first described emotions in animals in 1872 (*The Expression of Emotions*)

*in Man and Animals*) noting that certain facial expressions and body postures were seen in certain contexts. He also described the similarity between human and non-human emotions. This work was criticized for over a century by many who considered it “anthropomorphic.” Animal emotions were considered “fuzzy”—falling outside the realm of “real science.” Consequently,

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animal emotions were generally dismissed and not studied scientifically.

Worldwide, the last half century has seen an increased interest by the public and scientists in animal sentience. Scientists, particularly animal welfare scientists, realized that understanding how animals feel can improve animal welfare. However, to understand how animals feel, required not only new methods (to understand and study animal motivation, preference, frustration, stress, pain, play behavior, and the importance of natural behavior), but also the development of explanatory frameworks to understand animals’ emotions. Despite our increased scientific understanding of animal sentience, discussion of animals’ emotions is often dismissed as anthropomorphic (attributing human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to animals). We as veterinarians need to understand the science of animal sentience and use that knowledge to improve animal welfare for all species.

The levels of sentience attributed to various farm animals also seem to differ, as

do the animal welfare laws. Laws in many countries prohibit shackling or hanging of conscious animals at the time of slaughter. However, legislators in the U.S. apparently failed to consider farmed poultry as sentient, thus excluding them from the Animal Welfare Act that mandates minimum welfare standards at slaughter. So in the U.S., a painful and distressing slaughter process

can be done legally because a sentient animal was deemed not sentient by legislators.

Since in general humans are more likely to attribute sentience and emotion to animals that provide pleasure, recreation, or companionship but not food, we as a U.S. society are more likely

to attribute happiness or joy to our dogs, but not our cows. Dogs can become “bored” but not cows; horses can become frustrated but not sows; parrots need ‘environmental enrichment’ but not chickens. One of the complaints about the Happy California Cows commercials (note they have disappeared) was that they were unrealistic. Is that because cows cannot be happy or because cows in California cannot be happy?

Because an animal does not behave like a human does not mean that the animal does not feel or perceive her environment and the changes that occur in it. Because an animal has a utilitarian or economic purpose does not negate its sentience. When we deny that animals have the capacity to feel, to perceive, to have emotions, we deny the science that does not fit our preconceived notions.

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