



ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP

Agroecology for Sustainable Food and Farming

BRIEFING PAPER in support of 66, 112 & 113

The Precautionary Principle's application to Animal Welfare

The Precautionary Principle applies to any field in which there is *exposure to potential serious or irreversible harm*. It therefore encompasses animal welfare, because welfare is the opposite of harm.

It is beyond reasonable doubt that many animals are capable of intelligent behaviour and in some cases demonstrate cultural, genuine communication skills. It is equally beyond doubt that many of them suffer. *Animals ought to be regarded as being capable of living well or badly, according to whether humans treat them cruelly or with kindness. One ought not to demand evidence proving their capacity for pain in order to treat animals well. Rather, one should only discount such a capacity if and when it is proven to be absent.*

These principles apply not just to farm animals, but to all animals. For example, to whales and dolphins – which suffer greatly, not only from individual pain, but from *each others'* deaths. They go to great lengths to protect each other, they mourn and are sophisticated, genuinely cultural beings. Yet they are still hunted. In the recent past some species were hunted almost to extinction.

Though a few cultures rely heavily on whaling, whaling as a whole has added relatively little to the sum total of human welfare; just a little extra meat and some oils. And although we cannot know beyond all possible doubt that the whales suffered grievously it seems likely that their suffering was enormous. That, plus the near extinctions (including the actual extinction of various cetacean *sub-cultures*) amount to an irreversible crime. In any such case, when we are uncertain how much capacity an animal has for experiencing pain, we must err on the side of protection. Basic animal welfare should trump non-essential improvements in human welfare. Only if faced with an emergency situation such as the need for self-defence can one decisively deny an animal's right to life, liberty or the avoidance of pain. There may well be evidence that points to farming or hunting animals being possible in such a way as not to subject them to avoidable suffering, but *the onus is on those wishing to harm the animals to provide such evidence*. Until they do so, the Precautionary Principle must be applied to prevent any serious or irreversible harm.

Animals should be presumed capable of welfare unless proven otherwise.

Further applications of the Precautionary Principle to farm animals

Preemptively dosing intensively farmed animals with antibiotics is reckless because it leads to increased incidences of antibiotic-resistant bacteria in both animals and humans. Mass dosing with antibiotics raises the long term risk of animals suffering epidemics. Potentially,

too, veterinary science could become too dangerous, and animals would then suffer in turn from a lack of vets.

When the Precautionary Principle is applied it frequently generates co-benefits for both animals and humans. For example, acting to prevent irreversible extinction in certain animal groups not only obviously benefits animals but also humanity: through buttressing ecosystems, providing genetic diversity, and so forth.

Policy change

So long as animals are regarded as property it is difficult to make significant progress in relation to animal welfare. Nonetheless, the Precautionary Principle can be used to make real progress without upending the existing paradigm because it clearly establishes the stakes in a rational manner.

The Precautionary Principle means that it is reckless to discount animals' rights to being free of avoidable pain, just as it would be reckless to disregard the human rights of a patient in a coma. We do not say it has to be proven beyond reasonable doubt that a particular human being in a coma is capable of suffering or capable of recovery. Rather, wherever possible, we keep them alive and do not gamble recklessly with their life. The same principle should apply to animals, which raises questions over most animal-husbandry and animal experimentation.

Animal welfare and Brexit

Animal welfare is a basis for successful political action because so many Britons care about it; this was proven recently by the interest in the animal sentience amendment to the EU Withdrawal Bill.

So long as animals are considered property, recognising their welfare will be outweighed by their owner's legal and economic interests. However, Brexit could potentially enable us to bring in stronger animal welfare laws and practices, on the basis of the Precautionary Principle which will enable us to go further than the evidence, requiring us to be *confident* that we are not harming animals.

It is wrong to assume that animals cannot experience pain or feel misery if there is any reasonable possibility that they might.

If fish (and even shellfish and insects) *might* be capable of feeling pain then it should not be right to subject them to pain except with very good reason. Only where such proof is present beyond reasonable doubt (e.g. nematodes) are welfare considerations irrelevant.

The Precautionary Principle provides a powerful basis upon which to legislate for animal welfare. Brexit in theory provides us with a window to do this, and the popular will is there in the country for us to meet that challenge.



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