

Animal Sentience and the Law

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The recent announcement that animals are now to be [formally recognized as sentient under UK law](#) provides a good basis for campaigners and animal rights activists to push for law change. Alongside the announcement came a number of policy changes that will prevent horrific suffering. These included the banning of export of animals for fattening and slaughter in the UK.

New Zealand also recognises animals as sentient under the law. This means that animals are regarded as having the capacity to be aware of sensations.

And yet sadly, this awareness of [sentience](#) is not given adequate attention. Instead it is given short shrift when industry profit is at risk. While we are aware animals can feel, we still subject them to ongoing atrocities.

Sentience is the ability to feel sensation. With sensation comes a range of possible emotions. Take for example the evident satisfaction that a chicken gets from dust bathing. Anyone who keeps chickens knows how much they love to bathe in dry dirt to clean themselves, often together in groups. In fact, dust bathing is a relaxing social activity for chickens.

And here is where things start unraveling ethically and feathers get ruffled. Despite knowing about this important chicken behaviour, it is still legal in both the United Kingdom and New Zealand to lock egg laying chickens up in small cages without any access to loose dirt.

Chickens are legally considered sentient and in the same breath they are legally allowed to be locked up their whole lives. And then we are legally allowed to kill them with an automated knife after stunning them in electrified water while they hangin shackles. Then legally we can plunge them into a vat of boiling water to remove their feathers. Then we can eat them. Legally, of course. And despite their sentience.

And the industry spin is nothing short of ridiculous. Instead of bathing and scratching for insects and worms, a small plastic pad is provided. They call this an 'enriched environment'. I once visited a colony cage to see for myself. The birds were raucous and stressed, the soiled plastic 'scratch pad' was ignored as hens clambered over each other, frantically losing their minds.

In colony cages, birds become stressed and often get trapped beneath the 'perch'. Their bones become brittle from lack of movement and they suffer disease and feather loss. They also experience emotional distress, including anxiety, stress, boredom and fear.



It is not at all surprising that cages cause psychological distress. The colony cages provide 750 square cm per bird and are likened by the Egg Producers Federation NZ as an 'open plan' home. They claim that egg production is sustainable and meets the hen's welfare needs. It's absurd in the extreme and as consumers we need to challenge such wild lies.

In short, while both the United Kingdom and New Zealand recognise laying hens as sentient, they still subject them to enormous suffering.



And that is just one of many examples of how we are being duped and lied to by both legal frameworks and industry. They have each other's backs, and the animals are the casualties.

It's not a conspiracy. Rather it is cognitive dissonance – that state where you believe something even when all evidence points to the contrary. Sometimes we see only what we want to.

The same happens with poultry raised for their meat. These chickens have been bred to grow so large that their bodies can't keep up with the explosive weight gain. Many die before the six week period when they are slaughtered. They are raised in large indoor sheds with only an A4 sheet of paper size per bird. A 2013 Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) report found over half of the chickens studied were unable to walk or move properly, with the implication that they were unable to access food and water. Problems also described in the report included joint infections, twisted legs and bone tissue death. And if this isn't enough, the ammonia from their droppings burns into their feet and ankles joints.

These birds then get sent to slaughter at only around six weeks of age when they reach the weight of 2.5 kg. Handlers catch the chickens, dangling up to four in each hand by their legs and forcing them into small crates. Birds often suffer from dislocated hips, broken wings and legs, and bruising. Once at the slaughter house they endure the aforementioned shackles, electric current bath, electric cutter and boiling bath. And this is all after a short stay on Earth in an enormous hellish shed. Sounds like a fun day at the park.

I'm just keeping it real. While we are doing this kind of thing to animals is it genuine to say we recognise their sentience and have high animal welfare laws? Is it ethical to convince consumers that their meat didn't suffer when it was a living breathing animal, or that their eggs came from a sunny place?

I know there are many people in the UK and NZ who love animals and have genuine compassion for them and hate animal suffering. And yet, the suffering on factory farms is as intense as it can get. Many love animals and still reach for that roast or that packet of eggs.

It's not just birds who suffer in New Zealand or the UK. The pork industry has some devastating animal husbandry practices, especially in indoor factory farming systems. One of the most notable of these is the use of crates, which keep mother sows confined in a space so small they cannot even turn around.



Even animals that are not kept in cages suffer. Dairy cows are hooked up to machines twice daily and have the milk taken from them that was meant for their calves. Their calves have been separated from them at birth and many were killed before 10 days of age. These are called bobby calves and New Zealand sends close to 2 million of them to the slaughterhouse every year. Legally they can go 24 hours without any milk or water and spend 12 hours on a transport truck.

It is even legal in New Zealand to send pregnant cows to slaughter (unless birth is imminent). The cow is killed and the calf left to die in utero. The calf's blood may then be drained from his heart to be used in the blood serum industry.



Some calves are even born on the slaughterhouse floor or in the truck. Since 2018 the law imposes infringements on farmers if the cow gives birth on the way to slaughter or at the slaughter house. Information from an official information inquiry to MPI revealed that since October 2019 there have been 99 infringements.

We may recognize animals as sentient, but it means very little if we cannot treat them as such.



There is no way to farm animals kindly, and no way to genuinely respect their sentience while we are ultimately planning to kill them. If you don't already, please consider keeping animals off your plate.