

Science Brain flapping

Fox hunting and anti-vivisection: Why animals matter more than people

Outrage at fox hunting and anti-vivisection campaigns are just two examples of people putting animals first. But why do we favour other species over our own?



Some people think a fox's life is more important than posh landowners having fun. Hard to argue, really. Photograph: Calum Dickson/Alamy

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Less than a week after the election, the Conservative party have already announced plans to [overturn the 2004 ban on fox hunting](#). This has, inevitably, [triggered immediate outrage](#). You have to wonder at the logic behind this move. For one, considering Cameron's efforts to detoxify the Conservative party's image, it's so incredibly "old-school Tory" as to be laughable, like spending weeks reassuring someone you like that you're not racist then turning up at your first date in Klan robes.

Secondly, it seems incredibly unwise. What better way to maintain the surprising goodwill of the people than reintroducing that widely-condemned practice of posh people slaughtering small furry creatures for fun into a society where everyone now has constant access to video cameras and the internet. The Badger cull [was bad enough](#), and that had at least some scientific rationale for it ([however flawed that was](#)), and it was nominally for agricultural reasons, not entertainment. None of these apply to fox hunting, so people are understandably outraged.

As many have pointed out, there seems to be far more outrage about some foxes

than the welfare cuts that could devastate thousands. Even the [“save the NHS” petitions](#) didn’t get this level of interest. Yes, [people are easily outraged](#), but this is excessive.



📷 Can't really blame foxes for taking refuge in the cities if hunting is coming back. Photograph: Jim Dyson

Similarly, and more worryingly, a million strong petition has compelled the European parliament to consider [a ban on all animal research](#). This would have devastating consequences for thousands, even millions of sick people, given how [integral animal experimentation is to successful medical research](#).

Whatever your opinions on these issues, the above examples show clear examples of animals being prioritised over humans. This is actually nothing new, especially in the UK. The [RSPCA](#) was established SIXTY YEARS [before the NSPCC](#). The first recognition of child cruelty as a crime was actually [due to the RSPCA](#), where a child was defined as “a small animal” because no child protection laws existed. The UK also has some of the most comprehensive and rigorous [animal testing laws](#) you’re likely to find anywhere. It doesn’t forbid it outright though, which makes it still unacceptable for many.

But where does this prioritising of animals over our own species come from? It’s a uniquely human feature. You don’t get hippos taking on lions to defend the zebras, or seagulls dive-bombing cats to protect their ratty comrades.

Empathy is clearly a factor. The ability/capacity to appreciate and understand what another person is experiencing, “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes”, is undoubtedly crucial in grasping and reacting to the suffering of others. The human brain is surprisingly good at doing this, reading the cues of another person and assessing how they’re feeling, but it does have something of an egocentric bias; the emotions you’re experiencing at any given time are invariably projected onto the other person you’re assessing. There’s a region of the brain, the right supramarginal gyrus, which is seemingly dedicated to [detecting and overcoming this egocentric bias](#).





📷 Rats don't get hunted. Rats don't need protecting. Rats can handle themselves. Photograph: Paula O'Sullivan/PA

However, studies have shown that it's [much harder to empathise correctly when your own state is very different to someone else's](#), suggesting there are limits to this compensatory mechanism. Two people experiencing something unpleasant will be very good at empathising correctly, but if one is experiencing pleasure while the other is suffering, then the pleasure experiencing person will seriously underestimate this suffering. So the more privileged and comfortable someone's life is, the harder it is for them to appreciate the needs and issues of the worse off. But as long as we don't put the most pampered sorts in charge of running the country or anything, we should be OK.

Animals seem to short-circuit this system somewhat. People have a strong tendency to empathise with animals, some of it is undoubtedly cultural but there's an established tendency to favour or respond positively and emotionally [to anything "cute"](#), hence the focus on foxes, or images of puppies or kittens being used by animal rights protestors, rather than [fruit flies](#). This may be an [evolved tendency](#), and some suggest we favour anything that has the qualities of human children (small, cute, vulnerable, playful, big eyes etc.) Although, with the earlier RSPCA/NSPCC revelation, this suggests we prefer child-like things to actual children.

There's also the ["Just World" hypothesis](#), a persistent bias people have to believe the world is intrinsically fair, despite it being largely random. This belief can be quite integral to a person's worldview, and they'll work hard to preserve it. As a result, we [get victim blaming](#). Someone is suffering? Well it's a fair world, and that wouldn't happen in a fair world unless they did something to deserve it.

There's also evidence of subconscious defence mechanisms, especially if someone encounters a victim a lot like them. Seeing a victim you can relate to means whatever happened to them could happen to you, which is a scary thought. The brain gets round this by concluding that the victim must have screwed up at some point, not that bad things can happen to anyone (you). And thus, we diminish the suffering of others to preserve our own piece of mind.



📷 Some animals inspire feelings of concern and affection in humans. Others... don't. Photograph: PA

This doesn't apply to animals, though. People can hate and condemn fox hunting

all they want because, even in a worst case scenario, it's incredibly unlikely that they'll be mistaken for a fox.

Whenever you see a person in need, it's impossible to say for certain what lead up to that point. But an animal, no matter what the circumstance, is always "innocent", as they simply lack the ability to do anything to deserve suffering at the hands of man. Even the most vicious dog attacking a human is doing it because it feels it has to, not because it enjoys violence or cruelty. And thus, the suffering of animals [violates our moral boundaries](#) more easily than that of humans.

It comes down to how we are predisposed to often assume guilt or compliance in our fellow humans, but animals are always innocent.

Except wasps. Screw wasps.

Dean Burnett loves all people and creatures equally. Except wasps. He's got a [Twitter account, @garwboy](#)

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