

INTERNATIONAL ANTI-SPECIESIST PETITION

*Universal Declaration of the
Rights
of Sentient Beings*

Preamble to the Declaration¹

A.

- A.1 Whereas biology and science in general have taught us that the human being is an animal. As such, it belongs to the animal kingdom, to the class of mammals and to the order of primates (alongside the great apes, such as chimpanzees and gorillas). This scientific truth is now firmly established and can no longer be seriously challenged;
- A.2 Whereas *Homo sapiens*, more commonly referred to as “modern man”, “man”, “Man”, “human” or “human being”, is a species of primate originating in Africa that has spread and become established across the whole of the Earth. It belongs to the family Hominidae and is the sole surviving representative of the genus *Homo*, the other species having become extinct;
- A.3 Whereas science has catalogued around two million animal species. Total estimates suggest between eight and ten million animal species (known and unknown), terrestrial and marine;
- A.4 *Homo sapiens* is therefore an animal species that coexists among several million other animal species, terrestrial and marine;

B.

- B.1 Having regard to the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (UDHR) adopted in Paris on 10 December 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations, considering that recognition of the inherent dignity of all members of the human family and of their equal and inalienable rights constitutes the foundation of liberty, justice and peace;
- B.2 Whereas this universal declaration should consequently have been entitled “Universal Declaration of the Rights of Human Beings” rather than being limited to the rights of Man. This was however not the case. Nevertheless its text includes, without reservation, all members of the human family.
- B.3 Whereas this declaration seeks to endow human beings with equal and inalienable rights, forming a body of protected rights intended to guarantee them liberty, justice and peace.
- B.4 Whereas the essential basis of this protection is found in Article 6 UDHR, according to which: “Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law”;
- B.5 Whereas today the human being is almost the only animal to be endowed with **legal personhood**, allowing it to lay claim to inalienable essential rights that it can defend in court, either in person or through legal representation;
- B.6 Whereas the vast majority of other non-human animals enjoy no legal personhood whatsoever;

- B.7 Whereas the legal attribution of this legal personhood, by regional and national legislators, to human beings is the cornerstone of the legal domination of the human being over all other animal species;
- B.8 Whereas this legal institution, reserved solely for human beings, is one of the pillars of human supremacism, of the subjugation of other animal species for humanity's sole benefit, and of animal exploitation.
- B.9 Whereas this animal exploitation causes thousands of billions of victims among other terrestrial and marine animal species every year.

C.

- C.1 Having regard to the **Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, proclaimed on 7 July 2012** by eminent researchers in cognitive neuroscience, neuropharmacology, neurophysiology, neuroanatomy and computational neuroscience, gathered at the University of Cambridge to reassess the neurobiological substrates of conscious experience and related behaviours in human and non-human animals.
- C.2 Whereas studies on non-human animals have shown that homologous neural circuits correlated with experience and conscious perception can be selectively facilitated and disrupted in order to determine whether they are indeed necessary for the emergence of consciousness. In humans, new non-invasive techniques are now available to examine the neural correlates of consciousness.
- C.3 Whereas the neural substrates of emotions do not appear to be confined to cortical structures. In fact, the sub-cortical neural networks aroused during emotional states in humans are also of critical importance for the appearance of emotional behaviours in animals. Artificial arousal of the same brain regions generates corresponding behaviours and feelings in human and non-human animals alike. Wherever in the brain instinctive emotional behaviours are elicited in non-human animals, many of the resulting behaviours are consistent with experienced feelings, including the internal states that constitute rewards and punishments. Deep stimulation of these systems in humans can also generate similar affective states. The systems associated with affect are concentrated in sub-cortical regions in which neural homologies are extensive. Young human and non-human animals without a neocortex nonetheless possess these mental/brain functions. Moreover, the neural circuits necessary for behavioural/electrophysiological states of wakefulness, sleep and decision-making appear to have emerged in evolution as early as the diversification of invertebrate species; indeed, they are observed in insects and cephalopod molluscs (octopuses, for example).

- C.4 Whereas birds appear, through their behaviour, neurophysiology and neuroanatomy, to represent a striking case of parallel evolution of consciousness. Particularly spectacular evidence of near-human levels of consciousness has been observed in African grey parrots. Emotional neural networks and cognitive microcircuits in mammals and birds appear to show far more homology than previously thought. Moreover, certain bird species have been found to display sleep cycles similar to those of mammals, including paradoxical (REM) sleep, and, as demonstrated in the case of zebra finches, neurophysiological patterns once thought impossible without a mammalian neocortex. Magpies in particular have been shown to display striking similarities with humans, great apes, dolphins and elephants in mirror self-recognition studies.
- C.5 Whereas in humans, the effect of certain hallucinogens appears to be linked to disruption of feedforward and feedback processing in the cortex. Pharmacological interventions in non-human animals using compounds known to affect conscious behaviour in humans can produce similar disruptions in non-human animals. In humans, evidence suggests that consciousness correlates with cortical activity, without excluding possible contributions from sub-cortical or early cortical processing, as in the case of visual consciousness. Evidence of emotions arising from homologous sub-cortical networks in human and non-human animals has led researchers to conclude that primitive affective qualia, shared throughout evolution, do exist.
- C.6 Whereas the Cambridge Declaration concludes that: «The absence of a neocortex does not appear to preclude an organism from experiencing affective states. Convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Non-human animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates».

D.

- D.1 Having regard to the **New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness**, delivered at New York University on 19 April 2024 during the conference The Emerging Science of Animal Consciousness and signed by 580 internationally recognised experts across disciplines relevant to human and non-human consciousness (ethology, neurology, philosophy, veterinary science...);
- D.2 Whereas, according to the conclusions of these researchers, there exists, firstly, strong scientific support for the existence of conscious experience in other mammals and in birds;

- D.3 Secondly, that scientific evidence indicates at least a realistic possibility of conscious experience across all vertebrates (including reptiles, amphibians and fish) and numerous invertebrates (including, at a minimum, cephalopod molluscs, decapod crustaceans and insects);
- D.4 Thirdly, that when a realistic possibility of conscious experience exists in an animal, it is irresponsible to ignore that possibility in decisions concerning it. We should therefore take welfare risks into account and rely on the scientific evidence in order to address them;
- D.5 Whereas this declaration, by calling human exceptionalism into question (an outdated notion according to which there would exist an evolutionary discontinuity between *Homo sapiens* and other animals), aligns with the conclusions of the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, published in 2012.
- D.6 Whereas it nonetheless goes further by including additional groups (amphibians, decapod crustaceans, insects and reptiles) and by raising the notion of moral responsibility towards the welfare of the animals concerned.

E.

- E.1 Whereas a great many animal species are believed to be **sentient**.
- E.2 **Sentience, or phenomenal sensibility**, designates the capacity to subjectively experience states such as pain or pleasure, and to have lived experiences. A sentient being can feel pain, pleasure and a range of emotions: what happens to it matters to it. This confers upon it interests (notably in avoiding suffering), and even rights (to life, to respect);
- E.3 A sentient being lives its life in the first person, being **conscious** of itself and having personal interests and preferences, including that of living well and not suffering;
- E.4 There is today a broad consensus that the following are sentient:
- **Mammals:** whether wild (primates, cetaceans, elephants), farmed or companion animals (dogs, cats);
 - **Birds:** capable of feeling pain and fear, and of displaying complex social and learning behaviours (crows, parrots);
 - **Fish:** scientific and ethological studies recognise their nociceptive system and their capacity to feel pain and stress;
 - **Amphibians and reptiles:** although often less studied for their complex emotions, they possess the neural structure required to feel negative stimuli such as pain;
 - **Cephalopods:** including octopuses, cuttlefish and squid. They display remarkable cognitive abilities, a distinct personality, and are legally recognised as sentient in numerous countries;

- **Decapod crustaceans:** such as crabs, lobsters and prawns. They react to painful stimuli and display avoidance behaviours;
- **Certain insects:** notably bees, which possess advanced learning abilities, feel pain, and are capable of remembering emotions in a rudimentary way.

F.

- F.1 Having regard to **the Toulon Declaration, proclaimed on 29 March 2019** at the University of Law of Toulon, by French academics, calling for animals to be removed from their current status as «goods» or «things» so that they may be legally recognised as non-human natural persons.
- F.2 Whereas, having taken note of the Cambridge Declaration of 7 July 2012, in which these researchers concluded that «humans are not the only ones to possess the neurological substrates of consciousness», these being shared with «non-human animals»;
- F.3 Regretting that the law has not seized upon these advances to bring about profound change across the whole body of legislation relating to animals;
- F.4 Noting that in most legal systems, animals are still regarded as things and are denied legal personhood, the only status capable of conferring upon them the rights they deserve as living beings;
- F.5 Considering that today, the law can no longer ignore scientific advances capable of improving how animals are taken into account, knowledge that has until now been largely under-used;
- F.6 Considering lastly that the current incoherence of national and international legal systems cannot sustain inaction, and that it is important to initiate changes so that the sentience and intelligence of non-human animals are taken into account.
- F.7 These French academics declare:

F.8 « *That animals must be universally regarded as persons and not as things;*

F.9 *It is urgent to definitively put an end to the reign of reification;*

F.10 *Current knowledge demands a new legal outlook on the animal;*

F.11 *Consequently, legal personhood must be recognised in animals;*

F.12 *Thus, alongside the obligations imposed on human persons, rights of their own will be recognised in animals, allowing their interests to be taken into account;*

F.13 *Animals must be regarded as non-human natural persons;*

F.14 *The rights of non-human natural persons will differ from the rights of human natural persons;*

F.15 *Recognition of legal personhood in the animal presents itself as an essential step towards the coherence of legal systems;*

F.16 *This shift is part of a legal dynamic that is both national and international;*

F.17 *Only the path of legal personification is capable of providing solutions that are satisfactory and favourable to all;*

F.18 *Reflections concerning biodiversity and the future of the planet must include non-human natural persons;*

F.19 *This will thereby underline the bond with the community of living beings, a bond which can and must find legal expression;*

F.20 *In the eyes of the law, the legal situation of the animal will change through its elevation to the rank of subject of law ».*

G.

- G.1** Having regard to the **Montreal Declaration on Animal Exploitation, published on 4 October 2022** by more than five hundred researchers and philosophers denouncing animal exploitation.
- G.2** Whereas this international declaration unequivocally states that **the current use of non-human animals as resources** is morally reprehensible and must cease;
- G.3** This declaration states that:

« We are researchers in moral and political philosophy. Our work is rooted in diverse philosophical traditions, and we rarely all agree. We do, however, agree on the need to fundamentally transform our relationships with other animals. We condemn all practices that treat animals as things or commodities.

Insofar as it involves unnecessary violence and harm, we declare that animal exploitation is unjust and morally indefensible.

In ethology and neurobiology, it is well established that mammals, birds, fish and many invertebrates are sentient — that is, capable of feeling pleasure, pain and emotions. These animals are conscious subjects; they have their own point of view on the world around them. It follows that they have interests: our behaviour affects their wellbeing and is capable of doing them good or harm. When we injure a dog or a pig, when we keep a chicken or a salmon in captivity, when we kill a calf for its flesh or a mink for its fur, we gravely infringe upon their most fundamental interests.

And yet, all this harm could be avoided. It is clearly possible to refrain from wearing leather, from attending bullfights and rodeos, or from showing children lions confined in zoos. Most of us can already do without animal-derived food while remaining in good health, and the future development of a vegan economy will make this easier still. From a political and institutional standpoint, it is possible to stop regarding animals as mere resources at our disposal.

*The fact that these individuals are not members of the species *Homo sapiens* changes nothing: while it may seem natural to think that animals' interests matter less than the comparable interests of human beings, this speciesist intuition does not withstand careful scrutiny. All else being equal, membership of a biological group (whether delimited by species, skin colour or sex) cannot justify inequalities of consideration or treatment.*

There are differences between human beings and other animals, just as there are differences between individuals within species. Certain sophisticated cognitive capacities do give rise to particular interests, which may in turn justify particular forms of treatment. But an individual's ability to compose symphonies, perform advanced mathematical calculations, or plan for a distant future, however admirable, does not affect the weight owed to its interest in experiencing pleasure and in not suffering. The interests of the most intelligent among us do not matter more than the equivalent interests of those who are less so. To argue otherwise would be to rank individuals according to a faculty with no moral relevance whatsoever. Such a capacitist attitude would be morally indefensible.

It is, in short, difficult to escape this conclusion: because animal exploitation harms animals without necessity, it is fundamentally unjust. It is therefore essential to work towards its disappearance, in particular by aiming for the closure of slaughterhouses, the prohibition of fishing, and the development of plant-based agriculture. We harbour no illusions; such a project will not be achieved in the short term. It requires, in particular, giving up deeply entrenched speciesist habits and profoundly transforming some of our institutions. The end of animal exploitation nonetheless appears to us as the only collective horizon that is both realistic and just for non-humans. »

H.

- H.1 Having regard to the terms and conclusions of the aforementioned international Declarations of Cambridge, New York, Toulon and Montreal, it has today become scientifically, ethically and morally inconceivable to maintain that the human animal species is the only animal species to possess the neurological substrates of consciousness and, consequently, to be sentient;
- H.2 Whereas, on the contrary, biology and neuroscience have proven that a great many non-human animal species are equally sentient;
- H.3 They therefore possess, like the human species, **a phenomenal consciousness** that allows them to live their lives in the first person, to experience emotions, pain and suffering, and to have interests and preferences, including that of living well and not suffering;
- H.4 No serious philosophical, ethical or legal basis justifies human supremacism, other than an immoral and unjust will to dominate and economically exploit; this will amounts to a **murderous totalitarianism** against other non-human animal species;
- H.5 Animal exploitation harms animals without necessity and is fundamentally unjust. It is therefore essential to work towards its disappearance;
- H.6 Whereas, accordingly, **speciesism**, this institutional and systemic discrimination founded on the morally irrelevant criterion of species, must be abolished; incitement to speciesist hatred and to discrimination must be made a criminal offence under the law;
- H.7 **Animal exploitation must be prohibited and abolished**, save for vital exceptions for the human species, in exceptional cases previously established by law according to well-established criteria of proportionality and subsidiarity;
- H.8 Speciesism is a **systemic ideological oppression** which is the product of the interconnection of several institutions that organise, legitimise and sustain human domination over other animal species for the sole benefit of the human species. These institutions are political, economic, cultural and, of course, legal;
- H.9 Whereas **the law is one of the pillars of speciesist oppression**;
- H.10 By assimilating, by means of **a fiction devoid of any scientific basis**, non-human animals to exploitable movable goods in commerce, **national and international legislators are responsible** for the enslavement, appropriation, exploitation, servitude and killing of thousands of billions of sentient lives every year;
- H.11 The cornerstone of this supremacist oppression is the automatic refusal to grant non-human animals a non-human legal personhood and essential rights guaranteeing them liberty, justice, peace, the right to live and the right not to suffer under human domination.
- H.12 Non-human animals are sentient non-human persons and, as such, they must enjoy a non-human legal personhood endowed with the essential rights allowing them not to be exploited by the human species;

- H.13 National and international laws must be reformed to guarantee these objectives of social and legal equality between sentient persons, human and non-human;
- H.14 The refusal to grant non-human legal personhood to non-human animals is a weapon that the human being uses daily against the lives of thousands of billions of non-human animals;
- H.15 No civilisation worthy of the name should tolerate such injustices, violence and inequalities;
- H.16 **Speciesism is one of the greatest moral failures of our human civilisation;**
- H.17 Whereas it is accordingly necessary to grant non-human animals essential rights, and whereas the first international legal instrument that must be mobilised to this end is a « **Universal Declaration of the Rights of Sentient Beings** » modelled on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but extended to all sentient animal species, of which the human being is but one example among millions of others.
- H.18 This instrument of international law must work to put an end to an indefensible injustice for which human civilisation has made itself guilty towards other sentient animal species.
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NOTES

1. Almost all of the data contained in this preamble is drawn from the international declarations cited.