

PARLIAMENT PULSE

Understanding sentience and how it is applied under the ASPA

The Science of Sentience

Sentience is the capacity for subjective experiences with positive or negative valence - the ability to feel pain, pleasure, distress or suffering beyond mere reflex or noiception.

UK Regulatory Framework

Exact Text from Standard Condition 4 of Project Licences (ASPA)
UK UK Home Office Legal Primary is UK Home Office.

“

involve animals with the lowest capacity to experience pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm”

Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 — Standard Condition 4 (3Rs Refinement)

Note: The phrase 'lower sentence' does not appear in the Act or Standard Conditions.

How regulation applies sentience in practice

The Sentience Recognition Gap in UK Animal Research



Key tensions

The regulatory system claims to be evidence based while embedding contested ethical assumptions about the moral significance of different sentient beings suffering.

Strong points for challenge

1. The use of “lower sentence” as shorthand is presented as technical but requires moral judgements about the relative worth of different animals’ experiences.
2. Once sentience is recognised, decisions to cause suffering involve ethical choices, not just scientific ones.
3. The claim of ‘no formal hierarchy’ while operating a system of relative capacity creates a clear inconsistency.
4. Greater transparency is needed about the actual ethical criteria used by ASRU and licence holders when they decide one sentient species is preferable to another.

ACTION: MP’s can ask for greater transparency in the ethical criteria used by ASRU and question the inconsistency in the terminology used by the Government in explaining this to MP’s.

Key Evidence Frameworks:

1. Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness 2012 - Affirmed that non-human animals including mammals, birds and octopuses, possess the neurological substrates for conscious experience.
2. LSE (Birch et al., 2021) a DEFRA- commissioned analysis of over 300 studies using an 8 criteria framework. Concluded there is strong evidence of sentience in cephalopods and decapods crustaceans.