

Why Should Animals Have Rights?

A Brief History of Animal Rights Legislation and Activism

by **[Doris Lin](#)**

Updated July 15, 2017

Advocacy groups and humanitarians alike have long argued for the rights of animals around the world, fighting for their right as sentient creatures to a life free of torture and suffering. Some advocate for not using animals as food, clothing or other goods and others such as vegans even go as far as to denounce the use of animal by-products.

In the United States, people often say that they love animals and that they consider their pets to be part of the family, but many draw the line at animal rights.

Isn't it enough that we treat them humanely? Why should animals have rights? What rights should animals have? How are those rights different from human rights?

The fact of the matter is that since the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) issued the 1966 [Animal Welfare Act](#), even animals used in commercial farming are entitled to a certain base-level of treatment. But that differs from the wants of animal rights activist groups like [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals](#) (PETA) or the more extreme British direct-action group known as the Animal Liberation Front.

Animal Rights Versus Animal Welfare

The animal welfare view, which is [distinguishable from the animal rights view](#), is that humans can use and exploit animals as long as the animals are treated humanely and the use is not too frivolous. To [animal rights](#) activists, the main problem with this view is that humans do not have the right to use and exploit animals, no matter how well the animals are treated.

Buying, selling, breeding, confining, and [killing animals](#) infringe on the animals' rights, no matter how "humanely" they are treated.

Furthermore, the idea of treating animals humanely is vague and means something different to everyone. For instance, an egg farmer may think that there is nothing wrong with killing male chicks by [grinding them up alive](#) to cut feeding costs versus yield.

Also, "cage-free eggs" are not as humane as the industry would have us believe. In fact, a cage-free egg operation buys their eggs from the same hatcheries that [factory farms](#) buy from, and those hatcheries kill the male chicks as well.

The idea of "humane" meat also seems absurd to animal rights activists, since the animals must be killed to obtain the meat. And for farms to be profitable, those animals are killed as soon as they reach slaughter weight, which is still very young.

Why Should Animals Have Rights?

Animal rights activism is based on the idea that animals are sentient and that speciesism is wrong, the former of which is scientifically backed — an international panel of neuroscientists declared in 2012 that non-human animals have consciousness — and the latter is still hotly contested among humanitarians.

Animal rights activists argue that because animals are sentient, the only reason humans are treated differently is speciesism, which is an arbitrary distinction based on the incorrect belief that humans are the only species deserving of moral consideration. Speciesism, like racism and sexism, is wrong because animals popular in the meat industry like cows, pigs and chickens suffer when confined, tortured and slaughtered and there is no reason to morally distinguish between humans and non-human animals.

The reason that people have rights is to prevent unjust suffering. Similarly, the reason that animal rights activists want animals to have rights is to prevent them from suffering unjustly. We have [animal cruelty statutes](#) to prevent some animal suffering, although U.S law prohibits only the most egregious, extraordinary animal cruelty. These laws do nothing to prevent most forms animal exploitation, including fur, [veal](#) and [foie gras](#).

Human Rights Versus Animal Rights

No one is asking for animals to have the same rights as humans, but in an animal rights activist's ideal world, animals would have the right to live free of human use and exploitation — a [vegan world](#) where animals are no longer used for food, clothing or entertainment.

While there is some debate as to what [basic human rights are](#), most people recognize that other humans have certain fundamental rights.

According to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, human rights include "the right to life, liberty and security of person..an adequate standard of living...to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution...to own property...freedom of opinion and expression...to education...of thought, conscience and religion; and the right to freedom from torture and degrading treatment, among others."

These rights are different from animal rights because we have the power to ensure that other humans have access to food and housing, are free from torture, and can express themselves. On the other hand, it's not in our power to ensure that every bird has a nest or that every squirrel has an acorn. Part of animal rights is leaving the animals alone to live their lives, without encroaching on their world or their lives.

CITE