

Science & Policy



The Humane Society Institute for Science & Policy



CONFERENCE REPORT

The Science of Animal Thinking and Emotion

Date: 17-19 March 2014

Location: Washington, DC

Organizer: Humane Society Institute for Science and Policy

Major sponsor: World Society for the Protection of Animals

This conference brought together thought-leaders in the science and implications of animal sentience, as well as influential voices in the policy domain. The primary aim of the conference was to identify advances in the scientific and public understanding of animal cognition, awareness and emotion, and to identify promising avenues for leveraging this information towards positive change in government, industry and other sectors.

Conference presenters included experts in the field of animal behavior and cognition. Topics included the brain substrates of animal emotions, animals' creative approaches to problem solving, motivation in chickens, consciousness in fishes, the social dynamics of play, the elements of animal language, the emotional brains of dogs, tool use and coordinated hunting in reptiles, and the importance of culture to the integrity of cetacean populations. The conference program also featured experts in applying science to policy change through the media, legislation, and understanding cultural sensitivities and biopolitical influences.

Throughout the conference the World Society for the Protection of Animals hosted a booth which highlighted the important work WSPA is doing to promote and raise awareness about the importance of animal sentience. This included providing information to relevant stakeholders on the [Sentience Mosaic](#) website, WSPA's original research on identifying measures of positive emotions in cows, and a systematic review of animal sentience research.

The central place of sentience—the capacity to experience feelings—in human-animal relations cannot be overestimated. This is more recognizable in Europe than in other geopolitical regions. Scientific advances and citizen pressures combined to foster the reconceptualization of animals as sentient beings. Language reflecting this is now enshrined into European Union law with enactment of The Treaty of Lisbon in 2009. However, enforcement of relevant policy and measurable changes in behavior and practice remain challenging for Europe and elsewhere.

These and related developments can and should be seen as opportunities. A set of civilizing processes in the past century have fostered epochal changes to human cultural norms.

Demographic statehoods are replacing autocracies, world literacy rates have grown dramatically (see Fig 1), women are more empowered (see Fig 2 for one related measure, fertility rates), reason has risen, and a truly global community has formed, connected by electronic media and international commerce. Injustices of the past such as colonialism, institutionalized slavery, the subjugation of women, and the denial of civil rights have been eliminated for many people in the world.

To these developments we can add the so-called *cognitive revolution* in science, which has raised the study of animals' internal states to a respectable and expanding discipline. A concomitant burgeoning of interest in the moral status of animals perceived as having complex cognitive capacities might not be a mere coincidence.

Nevertheless, non-human animals remain legally defined as the property of humans. Global consumption rates of animals by humans are unprecedented, as industrial methods of producing animal protein expand regionally. In seeking to advance awareness of animal sentience and its possible role in the civilizing process, it helps to be aware of relevant social dynamics which were brought to light at the conference. For example, whereas scientists are generally more interested in differences between humans and other animals, the public seem more engaged by similarities between the two. Also, social media have a strong draw on youth across the globe and represent an intriguing possibility for transmitting information (and even cultural memes) to young people.

The conference and ensuing discussions identified several challenges that can be viewed as opportunities:

- Identifying the cues that trigger our natural empathy toward animals.
- Increasing media interest in animal welfare science and scientists.
- Continuing to advance creative experimental designs that measure animal sentience and emotions.
- Encouraging scientific publishing and peer-review to be more open to the potential of cognition and emotion in species other than humans.
- Cultivating funding cultures globally that value animal welfare research, in part because of its contribution to improving human well-being.
- Changing the current structure of science to foster recruitment of animal welfare scientists.
- Being responsive to different cultures (e.g., China) that tend to regard "welfare" as a luxury because it is viewed as providing more than simple basic needs and therefore not for animals.
- Shifting the mind-set that animal welfare is a burden, to one in which animal welfare is essential for a sustainable, better future.
- Making studies of animal sentience and the results published in the scientific literature more understandable and less jargon-dominated for the general public.
- One of the initiatives that the Humane Society Institute for Science and Policy plans to embark on is the formation of a Center for Animal Sentience (CAS). The CAS will coordinate closely with the Sentience Mosaic developed by WSPA. Among the new projects being considered for this collaboration are:
 - Developing an online journal on animal sentience.
 - Expanding online presence of animal sentience through the Sentience Mosaic and CAS.
 - Establishing a way forward to include Animal Sentience language more broadly in legislative and regulatory frameworks.
 - Developing a media training program on the topic for interested scientists.
 - Developing a series of factsheets aimed at primary and secondary age children.
 - Developing a campaigners guide to animal sentience, tailored to different cultures.
 - Updating and expanding Wikipedia offerings on animal sentience.

The HSISP and WSPA welcome and encourage the involvement of academic stakeholders in these initiatives.

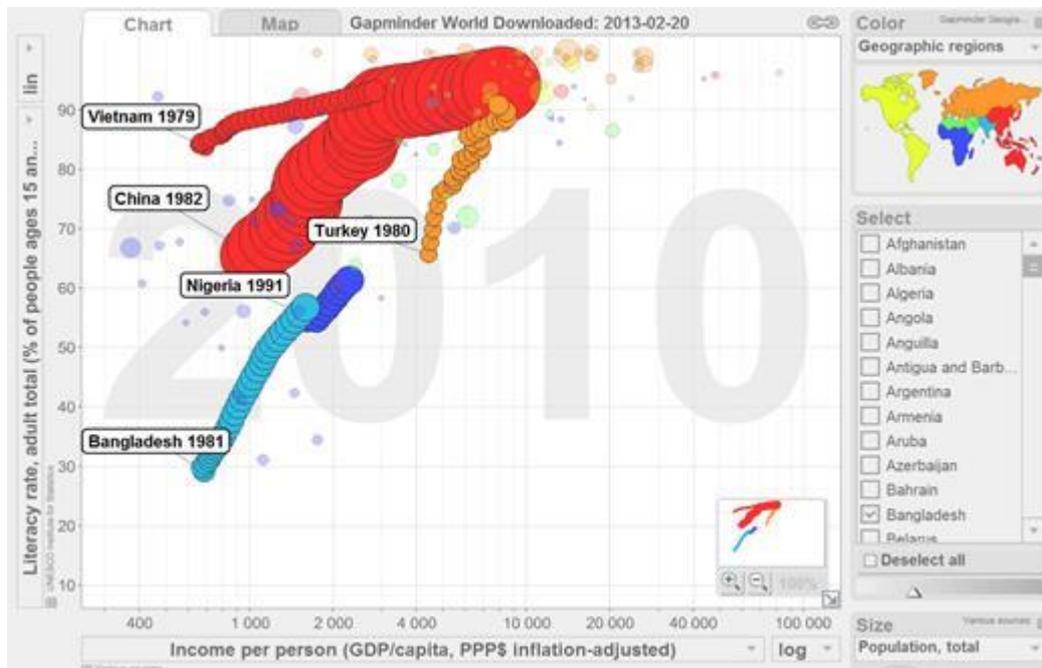


Figure 1: Changes in literacy rates in five selected countries from 1980 to 2010 (downloaded from Gapminder.org on March 27, 2014).

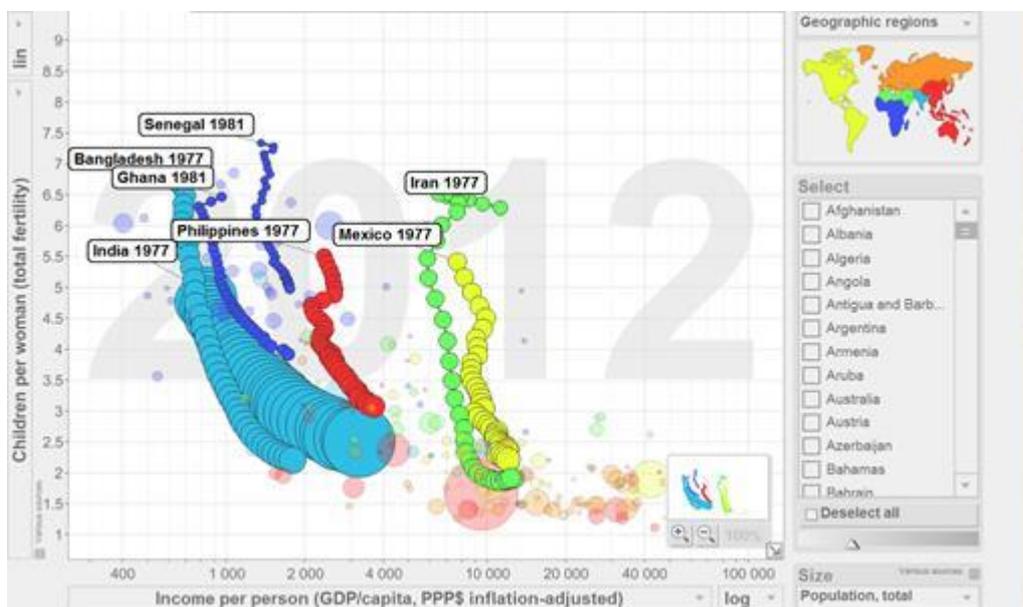


Figure 2: Screenshot of children/per woman changes in Senegal, Ghana, Bangladesh, India, Iran and Mexico showing tremendous declines from 1980 to 2010. (Downloaded from Gapminder.org on March 27, 2014)