

MONOGRAPH

Animal welfare

The neverending debate



Monograph coordinated by Enrique Font and Pau Carazo

The idea that some lives are less important or deserve less respect than others is at the root of many of the worst disasters our society has endured. Xenophobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, ageism and other *-isms* make the headlines with alarming frequency. Not to mention the way we treat other species with which we share the planet. We slaughter billions of animals around the world every year for food, clothing, scientific research, and other purposes. Before they are slaughtered, many of these animals live in conditions that we would consider cruel if they were humans. Although insufficient and subject to constant revision, the available scientific evidence suggests that animals are sentient beings, capable of suffering and feeling pain, which for some should be reason enough to reconsider the way we treat them. Only a few decades ago, concern for animals and animal welfare was considered a frivolous matter without any sort of practical consequence. Today, the situation is very different. Animal welfare is becoming an increasingly important issue. It is the basis for debates, conferences and university courses, and even for changes in legislation with important implications at various levels. The new animal welfare law recently passed in Spain is a perfect example of the debate and controversy surrounding this issue.

Animal welfare has multiple dimensions and ramifications, both scientific and social. This is evidenced by the diversity of topics and approaches taken by the authors of this monograph. It also reveals surprising contradictions in our relationship with animals. While some species share our homes and receive all kinds of care and attention, others are

treated as pests or hunting trophies. A species may move from one category to the other depending on circumstances. An animal that enjoys legal protection in its natural habitat becomes an invader that must be eradicated when it is transported, usually by humans, to a different area. In the laboratory, a mouse is protected by relatively strict rules that ensure a



level of welfare compatible with experimentation. However, if the mouse were to escape from its cage, its status would immediately change and it would become mere vermin.

There are always several elephants in the room in animal welfare debates: apparent contradictions that almost everyone avoids mentioning, as if not addressing them will make them go away. The very legal definition of an animal is one such elephant. Current European law seems to mock zoologists by assuming that vertebrates are the only group of species that deserve to be called animals. Among invertebrates, which make up 95 % of known animal species, only cephalopod molluscs – such as octopus, cuttlefish and squid – are legally recognised as animals. In 2002, the UK Parliament passed a law recognising decapod crustaceans (lobsters, crabs, crayfish) as animals, but unfortunately European legislation has not followed suit.

Another elephant, a very large and politicised one in Spain, is bullfighting. Even European legislation,

considered by some to be excessively restrictive, leaves the door open to the unpunished torture of defenceless animals, using hypocritical and childish excuses such as «bulls do not feel pain», «they actually enjoy their own torture», «they were born for it», or «their torture is a deep-rooted tradition». Similar arguments have been used by those who defend fox hunting, which is fortunately now illegal in the UK. The killing of bulls has nothing to do with art and culture, no matter how much some people may insist. Or at least it is not the kind of culture that public institutions should be promoting in the 21st century.

The aim of this monograph is to provide elements for an updated debate on our relationship with non-human animals and their welfare. The authors of the various papers are recognised experts, each contributing their own perspective on a particular aspect of this never-ending debate. We would like to take this opportunity to thank them all for their participation.

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Pol Coronado (Águilas, Murcia, Spain, 1966) is the author of the artworks that accompany this monograph. On these pages, *Self-Portrait*, 2009. Collage on canvas, 100×40 cm.