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Ethical evolutions

navigating the future of animal behaviour and welfare research

Parker, Matthew O; McElligott, Alan G

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Matthew O Parker

Surrey Sleep Research Centre, School of Biosciences, University of Surrey, UK

Alan G McElligott

Department of Infectious Diseases and Public Health, Jockey Club College of Veterinary Medicine and Life Sciences, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China
Centre for Animal Health and Welfare, Jockey Club College of Veterinary Medicine and Life Sciences, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

In June 2022, a group of Animal Behaviour and Welfare researchers from around the world organised a workshop (<https://www.asab.org/conferences-events/2022/6/20/ethics-of-animal-behaviour-and-welfare-research-for-the-21st-century-and-beyond>) designed to prompt discussion about the future of ethics in animal behaviour and welfare research. This workshop was motivated primarily by lively discussions (predominantly on social media) surrounding articles published in animal behaviour and veterinary journals, in which the authors had carried out research with animals, or humans interacting with animals, that had not been seen by an ethics committee. There were two commonly cited reasons (by authors), for this lack of ethics approval: (1) authors suggested that (as far as they were concerned) they ‘did not require’ ethics oversight for the projects on account of the work being ‘sub threshold’ (i.e. below the threshold of that which would require ethical oversight), or (in some cases); (2) authors suggested that because the work was with humans (e.g. pet owners) it did not require ethics oversight by an ethics committee. Regardless of the reasons, or the outcomes, of these individual cases, we (Alan McElligott, Elodie Briefer, Kate Flay, Xin Huo, Hannah Mumby, Tamara Tadich and Matt Parker) decided to organise an international workshop to discuss these issues, and what the future of ethical considerations in animal behaviour and welfare research may look like. The workshop prompted some excellent discussions and led to the idea for this Special Collection. In the Collection, we have tried to capture some of the current debates and discussions that are emerging in



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Animal Behaviour and Welfare research across several fields, including wild animal biology, companion animals, zoo animals and farm animals.

The concept of pet ‘ownership’

Over recent decades, the roles of companion animals in our lives and the terminology used to describe human-animal relationships have evolved. A notable shift is the transition from using the term ‘owner’ to ‘guardian’ for human caretakers. While societal trends seem to favour ‘guardian’, there are concerns about its application. The choice of terminology impacts animal welfare research and practices. The article by Henning et al. (<https://doi.org/10.1177/17470161231186060>) considers the implications of using ‘owner’ versus ‘guardian’, focusing on the clarity, uniformity, and the ethical and welfare ramifications associated with each term. Their aim is to suggest terminological considerations for future welfare research and to better inform our interactions with companion animals. The authors argue that until a standardised terminology for companion animal relationships is set, researchers should choose terms that best fit the context of their study, whether ‘owner’ or ‘guardian’. They argue that the choice of words can reflect or influence perceptions, necessitating their exploration in welfare research and ethical reviews.

Ethics in marine mammal research

Marine mammal research, especially when it involves the killing of whales for data collection, presents significant ethical challenges. In their article, Papastavrou et al. (<https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016123118206>) discuss how their 2021 review of 35 studies that collaborated with Icelandic whalers exposed a widespread lack of understanding and consideration of the associated ethical and legal concerns among the involved researchers, institutions and journals. They argue that the absence or insufficiency of ethical statements in these publications makes it difficult to defend such research against public and media scrutiny, potentially tarnishing the reputation of early career researchers. Even beyond lethal research, other non-lethal methods, such as tagging and biopsy, also raise ethical concerns. The authors point out that there have been cases where marine mammals were inadvertently harmed or killed, and situations where the public have misunderstood tags for harpoons. Without explicit ethics guidelines, decision-makers at journals find it challenging to determine the acceptability of papers based on their ethical integrity.

Ethical review in zoo animal research

The topic of who is responsible for carrying out ethical reviews for work that is undertaken in zoological collections is explored by Fernandez and McWhorter

(<https://doi.org/10.1177/17470161231188615>). Research in zoos serves as a significant scientific endeavour, but it brings forth various ethical challenges. In their article the authors focus particularly on addressing the ethical dimensions of zoo research by considering three main topics. First, they contextualise zoo research in terms of the history of research ethics in general. They delve into the evolution of both human and animal research ethics, tracing its roots and development over time, and consider how this relates to work carried out in zoos. Second, the authors provide a set of foundational guidelines for conducting ethical research in zoos. They argue that these guidelines could serve as a roadmap for zoo researchers, ensuring that their studies maintain the highest ethical standards. Finally, they consider potential theoretical, ethical dilemmas that researchers may face when working in zoos, offering pragmatic solutions and illustrative examples for each. Central to the article's theme is the emphasis on prioritising the welfare of animals in all zoo research projects and the authors argue that any research proposal relating to zoo animals should undergo scrutiny from a research ethics review committee before the study's initiation. Critically, the authors state that while observation-only studies may require minimal research ethics review, they still require some type of examination by a research ethics review committee. This need for ethical oversight has important and far-reaching relevance beyond work that is carried out at zoological collections.

Adherence to ARRIVE guidelines 'Essential 10' in farm animal research

The systematic review by Calderon-Amor et al. (<https://doi.org/10.1177/17470161231183100>) evaluated the adherence of research involving farm animals to the ARRIVE Essential 10 requirements and their ethics oversight. Guidelines called ARRIVE were introduced by Kilkenny et al. (2010) to standardise the reporting of animal research, but initial versions saw minimal improvement in reporting standards. In 2020, an updated version, ARRIVE Guidelines 2.0 (Lilley et al. 2020), was released which classified information into two sets, focusing on essential reporting requirements and ethical considerations; this study examines compliance with these updated guidelines (ARRIVE 10). The authors analysed a total of 133 articles from three different journals. Interestingly, 15% of the reviewed articles failed to include an ethical statement. The review also revealed that journals with higher impact factors, as well as articles originating from the Global South, tended to present ethical statements more often. When examining the Essential 10 items, the authors found that 'Blinding' was the least adhered to, while 'Outcome Measures' had the highest score. The authors argue that the ARRIVE Essential 10 guidelines are critically important for researchers, as they play a crucial role in identifying potential welfare risks in animal research and evaluating the validity of results.

In summary, we are excited to bring these excellent articles to publication and we hope that they will prompt consideration of ethical issues surrounding work in several fields of animal behaviour and welfare research. Research on understanding animal behaviour, and improving animal welfare, are critically important and should be strongly supported. However, as these articles point out, the necessity of this work does not preclude the need for careful ethics review and, as a community, we must improve. Finally, we would like to thank the Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour (ASAB) for providing the funding that allowed us to run the workshop, which resulted in this Special Issue.

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