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STRANGE BEAST

Simon Cooper explains why the Animal Sentience Bill could change everything



WHICH COUNTRY IS ABOUT TO PASS legislation that puts the rights of a lobster above that of an unborn human foetus? Now, to be clear, I have no axe to grind in the abortion debate, but I find it utterly dumbfounding that the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill progressing through the UK Parliament will do precisely this.

It is a strange beast of a bill because it is not actually proposing any animal welfare legislation; anything you have read recently about live transportation of cattle or dog collars will have been enacted under separate legislation or existing ministerial powers.

What this bill does, should it become law, is instruct the Minister for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, currently George Eustice, to create an Animal Sentience Committee that may produce a report on any government policy that is or has been formulated or implemented, with regard to the ways in which the policy might have an adverse effect on the welfare of animals as sentient beings. The report will be laid before parliament to which the Minister has to respond within a given timeframe.

Firstly, you might ask who will be on the committee. The answer is we have no idea; every aspect of the committee is entirely at the direction of the Minister. However, if you ask what animal will fall under the remit of the committee you get a very thorough answer in three parts: any vertebrate other than *homo sapiens* [note the exclusion], so that is mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fishes. Any cephalopod mollusc, for instance squid, octopus or cuttlefish. Any decapod crustacean, so crabs, lobsters, crayfish, shrimp, prawns, plus the other 15,000 species that fall under this classification. It doesn't take much imagination to comprehend the vast areas of national life over which the Committee might range.

It seems to me abundantly clear that this Committee will soon become the focus of every special interest group who would call upon the Committee to report on a particular government policy, new or old, through what might often be a narrow prism. Now, that is fine up to a point but what we know is that highly motivated, well-resourced and dedicated minority interests (beavers!) are able to have a disproportionate impact on government policy. And it would be a brave Minister of State who disregarded the reports of the Committee time and time again.

At some point recreational angling will come under the scrutiny of the Committee because there is plenty of legislation governing catch-and-kill limits plus the presumption of unlimited catch-and-release to go at. Faced with the question as to how either of these might in the words of the bill, have "an adverse effect on the welfare of animals as sentient beings", how do you think the Committee report might read? To my mind catch-and-kill is easier to defend than catch-and-release and I'm not alone in this; at least two European countries have banned the latter in favour of the former. So, where would that leave us with salmon where releasing has become the norm by practice or legislation. Or grayling who are rarely killed? Or just about any coarse fish you care to name. Do we kill them all, regardless of food or conservation value, just so we may continue to fish? Or will fishing simply be banned?

I don't ask these questions expecting immediate answers, I ask them because, at some point, they will be asked of angling if this bill becomes law. And the likelihood is that it will. The government is committed. We need to be prepared. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk) the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale.