

CIWF Short Report on Animal Sentience May 2010

Balcombe, J. (2010) *Second Nature: The Inner Lives of Animals*
New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Animals practise democracy. That is one of the unexpected and poignant examples in *Second Nature* of the complex lives of non-human species. Decision-making in animal groups has been assumed to be autocratic, but recent research demonstrates that swans, deer, buffalo and others have systems for majority rule. When the animals make a decision to move from one area to another, for example, individuals vote by standing up, or gazing in the desired direction, or using particular head movements. Generally a herd does not move until a majority of about 60% wishes to do so. "Individuals in the group may have different interests and desires at a given moment, but they are willing to suppress those immediate wants for the greater benefit of staying with the group." (135)

Lions are curious and rats show empathy. Fishes act co-operatively and baboons befriend and assist other group members. According to scientist Dr. Jonathan Balcombe, the evidence is overwhelming that animals are sentient with rich emotional and social lives. Long fascinated by animals and biology, Dr. Balcombe earned a PhD focusing on the behaviour of free-tailed bats. Drawing on years of close observation of animals, the author shows that animal sentience is well-established based on emotional, sensory, perceptual, and cognitive abilities and moral behaviour. "By showing that animals think and feel richly, that they are highly sentient and sometimes even virtuous, I hope to convince you that we cannot continue to treat animals cruelly or carelessly." (4) Animals, he says, "experience pain, pleasure, and emotions, and their lives have meaning beyond any utilitarian value that humans may place on them." (13)

The book addresses commonly-held myths, including that animals are driven solely by competition. Adversarial behaviour catches our attention, partly because of our own cultural conditions in which we compete for jobs and other desirables, says the author. But Dr. Balcombe shows that animal life is also marked by many and varied forms of co-operation, including in competitive situations. Male primates form coalitions to compete successfully against other males.

This sounds similar to the human practice of forming political parties to compete against other candidates. Social animals cooperate through “collective vigilance” (108) to warn other troop members of impending danger. Timber rattlesnakes like to spend time with family. Some mice breed cooperatively, putting numerous mothers’ offspring together to be cared for by all, in a kind of mouse daycare.

Dr. Balcombe’s phrase ‘second nature’ refers to a new, less selfish way that humans can relate to animals. Though humans’ first nature may have been to use the earth and animals for short-term gains, the author hopes that we are on the verge of a less selfish ‘second nature’ treating animals and the planet with respect. Optimistically, the author points out that moral and cultural change occur much more quickly than evolutionary change. “Morality didn’t originate with humans” (13) but since we possess strong moral awareness, we must be capable of using it in our relationships with animals. “The next great social advance for humankind is the establishment of basic freedoms for sentient animals.” (200)