Animal Protection Agency calls for an urgent shake-up of how governments consult on animal welfare and conservation

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The Animal Protection Agency (APA) is calling on governments to prioritise information firstly from independent scientists, secondly from animal welfare, conservation and environmental organisations, and lastly from those whose actions may cause animal suffering, disrupt ecosystems or threaten public health. Bizarrely, governments in Britain and elsewhere formally prioritise advice from certain sectors that generate multiple harms, rather than independent experts or groups that seek to remedy problems.

Using the trading and keeping of wild animals as an example, a new scientific study published in the Journal of Veterinary Behavior sets out how DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) routinely assigns greater importance to evidence from vested interests than it does from independent scientists or animal welfare organisations. To remedy this, APA is calling for the urgent adoption of a new 'Model Government Consultation and Advisory Protocol', as recommended in the article.

The article proposes that one of the reasons that a raft of hazards to animals, people and the environment persist is because government often gives disproportionate consideration to stakeholders in trading and keeping exotic animals - the 'problem generators'. Biased and faulty decision-making can result from not giving sufficient weight to scientific evidence, despite the fact that DEFRA is obliged, under the Civil Service Code, to make objective decisions.

The economic worth of a sector such as the exotic pet trade is not a stated priority of DEFRA on issues concerning animal welfare, and it is unclear whether its financial benefits outweigh its overall costs. The article speculates that the exotic pet industry may be afforded more influence by government due to misperceptions about its scale, and goes on to compare the level of public interest and support for the exotic pet trade and hobby versus the animal welfare sector. The findings show that the animal welfare and veterinary sector vastly outweigh exotic pet trade and hobby organisations in terms of employees, supporters and Facebook followers.

Says the article's lead author, Dr Clifford Warwick:

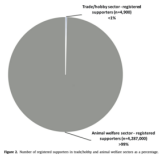
"Exotic pet trading and keeping is responsible for diverse and serious concerns, thus the sector provided a good example to test governmental approaches to the advice it receives from stakeholders that cause problems versus those that aim to ameliorate them. I think the public would be rightly dismayed to learn that the English Government actually places advice from the harm-doers above do-gooders. Unsurprisingly, animal welfare, public health and safety, species loss, ecological damage, and other crises - have all burgeoned while governments have asked the problem generators 'what to do'. The English Government can rightly boast a number of positive moves for animal welfare, but consultation bias is one area that needs to be fixed, and fixed quickly. If objectivity matters, then the independent scientists should take the lead. If size matters, then the animal welfare sector has it. In any event, it makes no sense to prioritise advice from the problem-causers."

Says Elaine Toland, Director of the Animal Protection Agency:

"Seeking evidence and recommendations on wild animal welfare primarily from exotic pet traders and keepers is akin to putting the fox in charge of the chicken coop, and yet this is how DEFRA routinely organises its consultations. Meanwhile those with the latest scientific evidence on the growing animal welfare and other crises are often side-lined. An urgent overhaul is needed to properly protect animals, as well as people and the environment."

APA is part of a large coalition of organisations calling for a transparent, independent, expert Animal Sentience Committee to support forthcoming animal sentience legislation. The Agency is calling on the Government to adopt the new Model Government and Consultation Advisory Protocol as set out in the paper where importance is prioritised firstly to impartial experts, secondly, to animal welfare, conservation and public health groups, and lastly to exotic pet trading and keeping parties.

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