Fundamental rights for primates

Cantonal popular initiative from Sentience Politics
Sentience Politics is calling for fundamental rights to life and to mental and physical integrity for non-human primates. It is doing this by means of a popular initiative in the Swiss canton Basel-Stadt. This initiative could protect several hundred primates from harrowing and deadly interventions. And for the first time, ethical discrimination according to species will be questioned in a referendum.

Chimpanzees, orangutans, bonobos, macaques and other non-human primates are highly intelligent, can communicate with humans in sign language, are capable of suffering and feel empathy for others. They can remember past events and plan for the future. Like us humans, they have fundamental interests not to suffer and not to be killed.

However, animal protection legislation does not take these interests into account. We experiment on primates under the most painful conditions and even deny their most basic needs – often for studies with highly questionable uses. The same interests should be considered and protected in the same way, independently from the species of an individual. In our policy paper, “Fundamental rights for primates”, we clarify the philosophical, biological and legal arguments for these fundamental rights in detail.
Each year, 60 billion land animals are raised and slaughtered in factory farms worldwide – most of them in awful conditions. Factory farming affects many more animals than research, and is therefore a more pressing ethical problem. However, fundamental rights for primates are ideally suited to question discrimination by species – speciesism – at a social level. While few people choose a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle, a majority of the Swiss population disapproves of animal testing on primates. For example, in non-representative online polls, 62% and 84% voted for our fundamental rights initiative. These demands are removed from the context of food. This means that decision makers in politics, the media and the economy are readier to take a positive position on animal rights. Personal consumption of meat is not affected – and therefore does not need to be rationalised. Voters can tick “yes” in the polling booth, without having to consider their own eating habits.
The initiative has good chances of success and could create a precedent. If for the first time some non-human animals are granted fundamental rights, it will become easier to grant pigs, cows and chickens similar rights later on. The initiative is therefore a foot in the door for more far-reaching demands.

Only 3000 signatures need to be collected for a popular initiative in the canton of Basel-Stadt. Popular initiatives nevertheless bring with them intense media reporting and public debate. Right from the start of the initiative, the biggest Swiss newspapers reported positively on the petition for a referendum. If the initiative passes, there could even be international reporting. For example, the fundamental rights action of the “Nonhuman Rights Project” for US chimpanzees made headlines globally – long before the judgement.

Even if the initiative does not achieve a majority, an awareness victory with over 35% voting yes is foreseeable. Past experience shows that popular initiatives can greatly influence sociopolitical debates over the long-term (for example in the case of the “Group for a Switzerland without an Army”). If the first initiative is successful, then similar initiatives in other regions and states are conceivable.
Further information

Website: www.grundrechte-primaten.org

Proposed legislation

The constitution of the canton Basel-Stadt will be changed as follows:

§ 11 Fundamental right guarantees
2 This constitution moreover guarantees:
c. (new) the right of non-human primates to life and to mental and physical integrity.

Support us

The costs of signature collection and campaign work run altogether to 80,000 euros, which mostly go on wages.

Please transfer your donations to the following bank accounts:

Beneficiary: Effective Altruism Foundation, Efringerstrasse 25, CH-4057 Basel, Switzerland
Purpose of payment: “Sentience politics”
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Thank you for your donations!

Images by Eric Kilby, Tambako The Jaguar, Karyn Sig and Dave Watts (via Flickr).
In the canton Basel-Stadt there are currently several hundred primates who need this protection through fundamental rights.

The fundamental rights to life and integrity in no way calls biomedical research into question. As long as the proposed fundamental rights are not violated, primates may continue to be used for research. Zoo-keeping which conforms to fundamental rights would also be possible.

Cantons can create additional fundamental rights that go further than the fundamental rights in the federal constitution. Our initiative therefore conforms to federal law. It does not concern the field of animal protection in the narrow sense of federal law, but rather the field of fundamental rights.

The same interests should be considered and protected in the same way, independently from the species of an individual.

We humans belong to the order of primates and are closely related to over three hundred other species of primate (so-called non-human primates). Non-human primates are highly intelligent, can communicate with humans in sign language, are capable of suffering, feel empathy for others and can remember past events as well as think about the future.

Current animal protection legislation and practice in Switzerland do not take into account the interests of (non-human) primates not to suffer and not to be killed. At their heart, these fundamental interests of primates are unprotected and are often sacrificed even to unimportant human interests.

The life and mental and physical integrity of primates can only be efficiently ensured through fundamental rights.

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