Special Section on the Definition of Animal Law

Introduction

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This special section on the definition of animal law stems from a seminar held by the Educational Group for Animal Law Studies (EGALS) at Åbo Akademi University from 18 to 20 September 2018. Titled *What is Animal Law? Aim, Content and Future: Is a new taxonomy in teaching and science needed?*, the seminar brought together an international audience of animal law scholars to discuss what animal law is and what it perhaps ought to be. At the closing of the seminar, participants were encouraged to submit short texts to the Global Journal of Animal Law for publication in this special section.

All in all, we received twelve submissions evidencing broad consensus on some points and divergences on some others. Many, for instance, defined animal law as a field of law meaning—prima facie, at least—all those features of a legal system that somehow involve or relate or pertain to animals. But there was also much discussion regarding the degree of involvement required for something to qualify as animal law. Just how significantly or directly must animals or their interests be involved for the labeling to be appropriate? And what about the degree of protection afforded to them? When describing animal law, our authors mention things such as ‘animal protection’, their ‘best interests’, their ‘inherent worth’, ‘animal welfare’ and even ‘animal rights’. (While our authors don’t generally (at least clearly so) consider animal personhood or rights essential to the concept of animal law, a few of them do mention them explicitly.) This—protecting animals for who *they* are—seems to be a relatively popular notion, one that distinguishes animal law from other branches of law that may concern them in some ways but do not necessarily aim to protect them. Consequently, not all animal-related provisions fall within the ambit of animal law. Just what kind of standards ought to be used for making the distinction is a question that merits further discussion.

Another popular subject many of our authors discuss is the interdisciplinary nature of animal law, both within and without law. The field of animal law obviously overlaps and has otherwise interesting interactions with many of the more established branches of law such as criminal, administrative, environmental or constitutional law. (In this regard, animal law is not unlike certain other relatively recent phenomena such as media and sports law.) Beyond law, animal law intersects with several scientific and philosophical disciplines such as biology, ethology, ethics and political theory. In fact, many of the foundational questions of animal law—what exactly counts as animal, for example—seem impossible to answer without recourse to considerations and values external to the law. Science and philosophy also influence the content of animal law in that they provide reasons to change, repeal and create altogether new laws therefore also facilitating society’s acceptance of the legislator’s work.

Finally, several of our contributors explicitly included the academic study and/or teaching of animal law in their descriptions. Indeed, the mere existence of this special section makes it obvious there’s more to the concept of animal law than just law that involves animals in one way or another. Academia’s ever-increasing recognition of, support to and engagement with the field serve to underline this point as well.

Animal law, then, and to conclude, seems to be a multi-faceted concept that goes far beyond mere law. It shows a political, legal and social state of being, embodied by multidisciplinary forms that rely on continuous scientific progress. Whereas animal law may already exist under other names, such as welfare regulations, criminal protection of animals etc., its content still needs to be clarified, broadened and improved. Consensually seen as a legal branch to paramount animal protection, it’s also a patchwork of ideas, ideals and rules, tending to improve animal’s lives. In this ocean of possibilities and needs, law is however perceived as the best vehicle to encompass all the phenomena that animal law may rise, as legal rules have the capacity to wear social considerations, and the advantage of being enforceable and sanctionable.