

ISN'T IT TIME FOR ITV'S *I'M A CELEBRITY... Get Me Out of Here!* to find some animal-friendly alternatives to the same tired, tacky, childish – and infamous – Bushtucker Trials?

After heavy criticism from viewers and animal welfare organisations, it did eventually stop forcing contestants to eat live animals. But the show still uses live rats, snakes, lizards, spiders and insects for cheap entertainment and profit. After no fewer than 21 seasons of dropping, crushing, chasing and kicking these hapless creatures, it's hard to believe that none of the celebrity contestants (or anyone else involved in the production, for that matter) has put their hand up and said: "Hang on a minute, this isn't right".

Its producers stress that they always comply with animal welfare laws, and they probably do (or there would be hell to pay). But just because something is legal doesn't necessarily make it right.

I had hoped that when *I'm A Celebrity* returned to home turf again this year (it relocated from Australia to North Wales amid the Covid-19 pandemic) ITV would see sense. But it is clearly a slow learner. The programme continues to portray animals in a dreadfully negative light – either 'scary', or 'gross', or both.

In the UK, at least, there is a more enlightened modern-day vision of a world where all animals should be treated with respect, kindness and compassion. We already ban hunting with dogs and the use of animals in travelling circuses, for example. Meanwhile, the government has at last introduced the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill to formally recognise animals as sentient beings with feelings and emotions (it replaces a similar EU law post-Brexit). This includes vertebrate animals by default, but explicitly allows invertebrates to be added through statutory instruments (indeed, a recent amendment now includes crabs, octopuses, lobsters and their relatives).

The challenge is that we tend to be mammal-centric. There's a kind of unreconstructed species prejudice at work: a dog is one of us but an insect is not. I look

my springer spaniel in the eye and I see a being with a soul that feels pleasure, pain, fear,

Conservationist Mark Carwardine thinks it's about time *I'm A Celebrity* respected animal welfare concerns



No live animals have been eaten on *I'm A Celebrity* since 2019, but should ITV go further still?

"I'm A Celebrity has seen 21 seasons of dropping, crushing, chasing and kicking hapless creatures"

MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

happiness, hunger, thirst, warmth, cold and comfort. Few people would disagree. But the more distant an animal is from us in evolutionary terms, the less we assume sentience – and the quieter the uproar if it is mistreated.

That doesn't mean to say that other animals do not have feelings. In 1872, Charles Darwin wrote that insects "express anger, terror, jealousy and love". Now, 150 years later, researchers are beginning to think he might have been on to something. The problem is that identifying (let alone measuring) sentience in insects and other invertebrates, in particular, is a moral hornet's nest. Are they just a collection of reflexes – dark inside – or do they have inner lives? Recent scientific research on bumblebees ups the ethical stakes by

suggesting that they may, indeed, experience something akin to happiness (a "positive emotional state").

We are a far cry from animal rights for all but, perhaps, as science moves on, we'll need to think about new issues such as

insect farming (which currently falls outside the scope of animal welfare laws). Should it remain unregulated, or would some welfare regulations make sense?

One thing is certain – the abuse of any animal for our human amusement is blatantly wrong. It really wouldn't take much creative brainpower for ITV to come up with a fresh, innovative, animal-free alternative

to the Bushtucker Trials. Surely, in the year when *I'm A Celebrity* ratings dropped to their lowest level since 2014, now would be the ideal time for the TV programme to finally grow up? 🐝

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