

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

A dolphin's right to life

Dolphins should be seen as 'non-human persons' with their own rights according to the government of India, which backed up its statement by declaring a nationwide ban on keeping captive dolphins for public entertainment.

This is not a new idea, but it's a good one. A Declaration of Rights for Cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) was proposed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2012 – no cetacean should be held in captivity or servitude, it says, and no cetacean is the property of any state, corporation, group or individual.

Meanwhile the Nonhuman Rights Project – which has Jane Goodall on its board of directors – is campaigning for legal rights for species other than our own, too.

No one is suggesting that animals should have the same rights as people (they wouldn't need healthcare or education, for example), but the idea is to give some species the legal right to life and liberty. It's not much to ask – it would merely require us to stop treating them cruelly and killing them.

But should we stop at whales and dolphins? How about chimps and gorillas – where should we draw the line? And if we give rights to some animals, how do

we justify our exploitation of others? These might not be easy questions to answer, but they're important ones to ask nevertheless.

Sadly India doesn't have a good record when it comes to conservation: it should pay more attention to its own Endangered Ganges river dolphin, for example.

But it does have a long-held culture of compassion towards animals. As Gandhi famously commented: "The greatness of a nation



“*Animals don't need to have the same rights as people, just the legal right to life and liberty.*”

and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”

By that measure, I sadly think that our own nation, under the wildlife-loathing leadership of David Cameron and Owen Paterson, can no longer be considered great.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.