

A child's right to non-anthropocentric education

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[Maneesha Deckha](#)

This article belongs to the debate » [Animal Rights: The Role of the EU Charter](#)

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A New Way to Think about Art. 14 of the EU Charter

The European Charter on Fundamental Human Rights (“the Charter”) is not concerned about the core topic of contemporary animal law: animal rights. But although the Charter is silent about animals, it is possible to connect certain human rights it enshrines to animals in a manner that can foment animal rights. The protection of a healthy environment in [Article 37](#) is an obvious choice inasmuch it is backed up by [Article 191](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and the European [Green Deal](#)'s commitment to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Indeed, there is a growing body of work aimed at harnessing environmental support for the rights of nature in favour of animal rights. In this contribution, I want to suggest a lesser theorized human right in the Charter that similarly has considerable potential to benefit animals: the right to education under [Article 14](#).

Beyond animal welfare laws

The benefit to animals I am contemplating is one that goes beyond welfare. Animal welfare laws emerged several centuries ago in Europe and have remained more or less the same since then. As I have recently [outlined](#), animal welfare laws regulate the use of animals to ensure “humane” use; they do not prevent death or other harm resulting from the human purposing of animals for instrumental ends. From an animal-centered perspective, as [Stucki](#) has observed, this is akin to international humanitarian law that regulates human warfare. Violence is central to both regimes subject to certain minor limits, which are often disrespected or poorly enforced. Animal welfare laws are thus ill-equipped to actually protect animals, even in the European Union which is a comparative worldwide leader in supporting animal welfare. Animal law advocates in Europe seeking much greater protection largely concur that [rights](#) – at least for [sentient animals](#) – are needed to meaningfully reduce animal suffering and the many harms flowing from human exploitation of animals.

Scholars have suggested different legal pathways to foment these rights sourced in existing legal frameworks. At the EU level, these have included [plans](#) to move away from animal-using industries and importing the growing [Rights of Nature](#) movement inspired by Indigenous and non-Western cosmologies and traditions from other countries. As noted above, some have also included marshalling the [human right to a healthy environment](#) to curb anthropogenic activities that harm animals and the planet. All of these pathways seek to stop harmful activities and transition to truly sustainable and healthy economies.

The human right to education as a new pathway

The human right to education has not been prominent in this discussion about creating new pathways to animal rights out of existing legal frameworks. Instead, the human right to education has received some attention regarding [vegan inclusivity](#) and the rights of vegans and vegan families not to be discriminated against in public school settings. The right to education in the EU Charter and EU in general is not age-specific, but a core focus is children, as the [leading case law and treaties](#) confirm. Ensuring that the school setting and school curriculum do not require families to participate in activities that go against their values is an important dimension of the human right to education. However, there is more to parse out from this right with wider effect.

When we delve deeper into this right, we learn it has been interpreted as a right to [quality](#) education for children. What might a right to quality education for children mean in the age of the Anthropocene, when rapid transformative change is urgently needed to halt climate change and place the planet on a viable course, and in an age when the EU has started to legislatively respond to this reality through the European Climate Law? Could it entail a right to acquire [critical information](#) about anthropogenic activities that harm animals along with other beings?

The European Union has already started to implicitly answer that question by [connecting](#) the right to quality education to climate literacy. This would appear to build upon the [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#) at the international law level. Article 28 of the CRC establishes the right to education for all children. Article 29 discusses the aims of education, listing “respect for the natural environment” in clause e. The reader can infer that a curriculum that omits this skill is deficient, rather than a truly qualitative education.

Animal rights literacy

But to achieve climate literacy, children also need animal rights literacy. Even as much as governments and media outlets have [underreported](#) the connection, and the EU [Vision for Agriculture and Food](#) does not identify the need to reduce animal-based farming, it is impossible to responsibly discuss climate change and environmental perils without [impugning animal agriculture](#). Consider that 80% of the land mass on Earth is taken up by animal agriculture, displacing and accelerating the loss of species and contributing at least 14% to CO₂ emissions and 33% of methane emissions (methane is 10 times more warming than CO₂). Discussing this connection invariably brings up the [conditions](#) under which animals are raised and the ethics of using animals as food commodities in the first place. The population, especially children, need to know more about the connection between climate impacts and animal exploitation – not less – to achieve quality climate literacy.

Some may argue that including animal rights in an educational curriculum is biased against industry and not objective. Some may worry that recognizing animal rights in law jeopardizes respect for human rights. But the lack of “objectivity” objection ignores the [hidden curriculum](#) that already exists in schools that normalizes the animal-subordinating status quo. Indeed, the [literature](#) theorizing about children’s education in relation to animal rights, as noted above, uncovers this hidden anthropocentric basis for education. The current curriculum often marginalizes vegan children and their parents in conventional schools with conventional catering, zoo field trips, science dissection, and books that normalize animal use and exploitation. Instead, it is plausible to argue, as [Pedersen](#) has, that the omission of alternative perspectives and critical thinking about the anthropocentric status quo compromises the inclusivity of children’s education, and hence its quality.

We could also suggest that another aspect of the human right to education is implicated, namely, that of the parents. Under Article 14 of the CRC, parents have a right to have their children educated in a manner that aligns with their beliefs. Omitting content about animal rights can be said to violate the commitment that education should be “objective, critical, and pluralistic” as [recognized](#) as early as 1976 by the European Court of Human Rights in interpreting Article 2 of Protocol No 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The second objection above worries that respect for animal rights will jeopardize human rights because it will dehumanize humans who are not socially recognized as fully human due to systemic ableism or racism. These are legitimate concerns, but getting exposed to

[different views](#) in this debate is precisely what critical and pluralistic education should be about. There is [ample literature](#) of why continuing to exclude animals from moral and legal regard actually [undermines](#) respect for human rights.

Overcoming the status quo

We do children more than a severe disservice when we do not teach them about such debates and other ways of imagining animals. If we continue to rely on the status quo in education, we implicitly promote the conventional Western worldview casting animals as non-sentient objects who we are relatively free to instrumentalize. In this day and age, it is reasonable to [conclude](#) that the status quo of human-first thinking in schools undermines children's right to a quality education.

We also make it much harder to reach our climate goals, let alone a world characterized by interspecies justice and harmony. The latter is something most people would probably claim to want. [Citizen initiatives](#) have prompted the EU to ban fur farming and cosmetic testing and catalyzed the EU Parliament to adopt resolutions regarding transitioning to animal-free research among a few other pro-animal initiatives. While these are excellent developments that value animals as sentient beings, the cognitive biases and gendered ideologies that characterize adult human [social psychology](#) and social relations pose considerable barriers to realizing individual change where it is most important for the climate and for animals: in dietary habits.

Conventional masculinity is associated with [sexualized](#) dominance over animals and denial of empathy for the vulnerable, making adult dietary change among men enculturated to eat meat to [perform their masculinity](#) difficult and creating [stigma](#) against vegans in general common. This is why reaching humans at an earlier age when associations with food are developing but not yet hardened is important. Schools can deliver more critical information about both animal rights and gender ideologies. While parents can of course also educate their children, including such information within education curricula to fulfill children's right to quality education under the Charter would more widely ensure that such information does in fact reach children.

As I have suggested [elsewhere](#), this type of pro-animal intervention seems particularly important given how much human children identify with animals in an empathetic way, indeed they often even initially find it difficult to distinguish themselves from animals. In Europe and beyond, childhood is [immersed](#) in relating to animals through books, films, and daily interactions. Yet, as suggested above, children also learn to dissociate from animals through such adult-mediated messaging. As part of a [maturation](#) process, they come to acquire that properly relating to animals means extending compassion, but also maintaining a sharp differentiation from animals and a position of human superiority over them.

If climate literacy initiatives are going to have the impact we want them to have, then children need to learn more critical information about the global food system including the European component and history. And if we truly wish for a different relationship to the nonhuman world, we are going to have to undo the human exceptionalist outlook we have in law but also in our worldviews. That will certainly require education and should be seen as a future-forward definition of a child's right to education under Article 14 of the Charter. Who knows? One of those children may one day alter the Charter itself or other human-focused rights documents to include animal rights as well.



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