



Animal Defenders  
Office ACT

Using the law to protect animals  
[www.ado.org.au](http://www.ado.org.au)

# ANIMALS—ARE THEY ‘THINGS’ OR ‘PERSONS’?

## STEVEN WISE AND THE QUEST FOR LEGAL RIGHTS FOR ANIMALS

If you know one thing about animals and the law, it is probably that **animals are property**. They are not ‘persons’.

And if you’re not a person under our law, you can’t have rights.

Animals can’t have rights under our law while our law treats them as property, or ‘things’.

Many animal lawyers are trying to change this.

One of the most famous is Steven Wise.

## WHO IS STEVEN WISE?

Steven Wise is an animal rights lawyer in the United States of America and the founder and President of the Nonhuman Rights Project (NhRP).

Steven Wise’s main focus as an animal lawyer is the issue of ‘animal personhood’—that is, **changing the law** so that it recognises **animals as beings who can have rights**, rather than as mere things. Steven Wise believes that the law needs to change in this way because animals deserve certain rights and protections.



## NONHUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT (NHRP)

The NhRP is an animal law organisation that aims to achieve legal rights for animals, or ‘nonhumans’, by bringing cases to **court** (rather than lobbying for new legislation).



If successful, the judgements could give legal rights to nonhumans. As well, the judgements would act as precedents for future courts that look at similar cases.

Recognising animals as ‘persons’ under the law would not mean animals have all the same rights as human beings. The law already recognises different classes of ‘persons’. For example, corporations are considered to be a legal person in their own right.

The NhRP aims to change the status of nonhuman animals to ‘persons’, so that animals may hold:

...such fundamental rights as bodily integrity and bodily liberty, and those other legal rights to which evolving standards of morality, scientific discovery, and human experience entitle them.<sup>1</sup>

The NhRP is currently working to gain ‘personhood’ for animals such as chimpanzees, elephants, dolphins and whales.

The NhRP focuses on these animals because they are ‘like us’. That is, they are ‘complex individuals’ capable of emotional and cognitive intelligence.

The closer they are to ‘us’, the easier it should be to have these animals recognised as persons by courts.



## HAS A COURT EVER RECOGNISED AN ANIMAL AS A PERSON, ANYWHERE?

Meet Sandra the Orangutan.



Sandra lives in the Buenos Aires Zoo. In November 2014 a local animal law organisation tried to have Sandra released from captivity by going to court.

How did they do it?

They used an old legal process called *Habeas Corpus*. This Latin phrase literally means ‘You shall have the body’. It is used when a person is imprisoned or captured, and another person asks a court to examine the lawfulness of the first person’s imprisonment. It protects a person’s right not to be unlawfully deprived of his or her freedom.

But if you’re an animal, you don’t have this right because you are a thing and not a person!

In Argentina, however, the animal lawyers filed a Habeas Corpus petition for Sandra the Orangutan.

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<sup>1</sup> Nonhuman Rights Project: [www.nonhumanrights.org](http://www.nonhumanrights.org).

They argued that Sandra had been unlawfully deprived of her basic right to freedom, as she had been held captive at Buenos Aires Zoo since 1994. They argued that Sandra was capable of both emotional and cognitive intelligence, and therefore should be granted legal personhood.

Initially it seemed to many observers that the court decision had gone in favour of Sandra, with the court agreeing that Sandra was a person under the law.

However, while animal protection organisations have heralded Sandra's case as a landmark ruling in animal rights, it is unclear what the outcome of the case actually was.

The NhRP has pinpointed what it regards as the most significant statement in the (translated) transcript of the decision:

It is necessary to recognise the animal as a subject of rights, because non-human beings (animals) are entitled to rights, and therefore their protection is required by the corresponding jurisprudence.<sup>2</sup>



While this statement appears to recognise an animal as a 'legal person', it does not refer to any past cases or laws. Nor does it refer directly to Sandra. In addition, the courts did not expand on what type of 'rights' an animal such as Sandra may be entitled to.

It is therefore not clear whether Sandra's case did in fact overturn the law and declare animals, or at least orangutans, to be persons.

## HABEAS CORPUS IN AMERICA, THE LAND OF THE FREE!



The NhRP has launched several Habeas Corpus cases in America regarding chimpanzees in captivity.

The first case involved Tommy the chimpanzee (pictured). Tommy has been kept in a cage on his owner's property for years.

The NhRP argued that Tommy should be freed because he is a person entitled to the bodily freedom that Habeas Corpus protects. While lower courts rejected NhRP's arguments, the case is currently on appeal.

In late April 2015 a New York court seems to have taken the first steps towards issuing a Habeas Corpus order regarding two other chimpanzees, Hercules and Leo. These two animals are held captive and used for biomedical research at a New York University.

The hearing is set to continue in late May 2015.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.nonhumanrightsproject.org/2014/12/24/reviewing-the-case-of-sandra-the-orangutan-in-argentine/](http://www.nonhumanrightsproject.org/2014/12/24/reviewing-the-case-of-sandra-the-orangutan-in-argentine/)

## COULD AN NhRP-STYLE *HABEAS CORPUS* CASE BE BROUGHT IN AUSTRALIA?

Habeas Corpus is a recognised legal procedure in Australia.

Great apes are held in captivity in Australia, including for conservation breeding purposes.<sup>3</sup>

A Code of Practice governs their use in scientific research: *Policy on the care and use of non-human primates for scientific purposes (2003)*.<sup>4</sup>

Habeas Corpus could therefore be used to try to secure the release of a chimpanzee or other great ape held in captivity.

If Australian animal rights lawyers were to apply the NhRP approach, they would have to address three main issues.

1. They would need to find ‘suitable animals’ who are seen as ‘complex individuals’, such as apes. Elephants, whales, or dolphins may also be ‘suitable’.
2. They would need to show that the relevant animal has certain cognitive capabilities to qualify as a ‘legal person’. These cognitive capabilities would include being self-aware, using language, having empathy, being able to retain and store information, reason, solve problems, and so on.
3. They would need to find a suitable jurisdiction by examining the relevant judicial decisions and laws of every state and territory in Australia, and how they may affect a court’s ruling on whether a nonhuman animal is a legal ‘person’ entitled to legal personhood and certain fundamental rights. They may also need to show how Habeas Corpus could be applied to cases of animal personhood in Australia.



Chimpanzees at Taronga Zoo in Sydney

**Animal Defenders Office 2015**  
**Research by Lily Ginsberg**

### **DISCLAIMER**

*While all care has been taken in preparing the information on this fact sheet, it is not a substitute for legal advice. For any specific questions we recommend you seek legal advice. The Animal Defenders Office accepts no responsibility for any loss or damage suffered by people relying on the information on this fact sheet.*

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<sup>3</sup> National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), *Principles and guidelines for the care and use of non-human primates for scientific purposes*, Public Consultation Draft 2015, page 5; available at: <http://consultations.nhmrc.gov.au/files/consultations/drafts/draftprinciplesguidelinescareusenonhumanprimates150327.pdf>. Consultations close 8 May 2015.

<sup>4</sup> This Code is being revised by the NHMRC—see footnote 3.