

ETHOLOGY

'Standing on the shoulders of giants' at the ISAE international congress

The 50th anniversary of the International Society for Applied Ethology (ISAE) was celebrated in July, with the return of its annual international congress to Edinburgh, the city where the society was founded in 1966. Scientific legacy was a prevalent topic at the meeting, in line with the congress theme: standing on the shoulders of giants. The event was the biggest in the ISAE's history, spanning five days, from July 12 to 16, and comprising almost 200 talks. Rachel Orritt reflects on proceedings

THERE was a strong sense of nostalgia at the congress opening ceremony, with ISAE member Dick Lane, who was present at the first meeting in 1966, being invited to give an opening address. He was followed by Michael Appleby, a member of the ISAE's council, who took delegates through the history of the ISAE, formerly known as the Society for Veterinary Ethology. He explained that the society had been born following the publication of the book 'Animal Machines' by Ruth Harrison in 1964, and the Brambell Report in 1965, which gave rise to the Five Freedoms. Since then it had continued to pursue the study of ethology in the interests of protecting the welfare of animals used by humans.

Dr Appleby stressed that, although the roots of the society were in veterinary medicine and behaviour, the ISAE benefited increasingly from interdisciplinary research and the expansion of the field in new directions. He also spent time honouring the work of past ISAE members, including David Wood-Gush, an esteemed ethologist and former chairman of the ISAE, who died in 1992.

Wood-Gush memorial lectures have been a feature of the ISAE's summer conference for many years, featuring numerous noted animal behaviour researchers. This year, Christine Nicol, from the University of Bristol, presented her research on decision-making, which still has considerable value in animal welfare research, despite of recent trends towards more novel measures.

A particularly memorable talk for delegates was Marian Stamp Dawkins' plenary lecture, in which she shared memories of her time as a PhD student, supervised by celebrated biologist and Nobel prize winner Niko Tinbergen. Professor Stamp Dawkins, of the University of Oxford, emphasised the importance of asking appropriate questions. She discussed Tinbergen's behaviourist perspective, and his four ethological questions concerning evolution, ontogeny, function and causation.

As well as lectures concerning the value of the past, speakers also looked to the future of applied ethology. Mike Mendl and Liz Paul, winners of the ISAE creativity award



Birte Nielsen, president of the ISAE, at the congress opening ceremony in Edinburgh on July 12

in 2013, spoke on developments in the study of animal emotion, and speculated about the consequences of assuming sentience in different species. The topic of animal sentience has a history of contention in the field of applied ethology. William Thorpe, who played a key role in establishing ethology as a branch of biology following the Second World War, famously asserted that it should be considered along with the four questions put forward by Tinbergen, as a fundamental question in the study of ethology. In contrast, Tinbergen argued that sentience, as a subjective state, could not be scientifically studied. Dr Paul expanded on this debate, reasoning that assumptions of animal sentience are essential for the continued study of animal welfare and applied ethology.

Another speaker who addressed concerns for the future of applied ethology was Hanno Würbel from the University of Bern. Professor Würbel stressed that, in order for research involving animals to be ethically justifiable, methodological rigour must be a primary feature of future research, thereby ensuring scientifically valid and reproducible results. He also offered suggestions to minimise the risk of bias in animal behaviour research, including the use of multilaboratory studies to investigate the external validity of results produced by a single laboratory.

As well as involving world-leading ethologists, the congress also encouraged participation from postgraduate students studying applied ethology. Many of these students gave talks and presented posters relating to their work, illustrating the commitment of the ISAE to safeguarding the future of the field. Students were also invited to a 'Students-Meet-Professors' lunch, a rare opportunity for students to discuss their research with academics from other institutions.

Another benefit of this event for delegates was the variety of research presented, both in terms of species studied and perspectives taken. Some of the more interdisciplinary talks offered an insight into issues of animal use that are yet to be addressed. For example, Sira Abdul Rahman, of the Commonwealth Veterinary Association, gave an interesting talk on the influence of religion on animal welfare, particularly in relation to practices in developing countries. Dr Abdul Rahman argued that many of the world's most prevalent religions teach favourable practices when it comes to animal welfare, but that the treatment of farm animals in these countries is poor because animal welfare teachings are not prioritised by religious leaders.

Daniel Nettle from Newcastle University described research on the effects of early life experiences on the behaviour of adult European starlings. Professor Nettle emphasised the advantages of using birds as models for studying the effects of experiences in early life on subsequent development in other species, including people.

The anniversary congress was successful in recognising the important work and influence of applied ethologists over the past 50 years. By the time it came to a close, there was an atmosphere of anticipation for developments yet to come, and the further advancement of applied ethology for the benefit of humans and animals alike. The next ISAE international congress will be held next year in Aarhus, Denmark, from August 7 to 10.

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