Ethics approval from the School Ethics Committee

Guidelines for applying with animal projects

Do I need ethics approval?

For all research and teaching involving vertebrates or cephalopods, both within and out-with the University animal facilities, the Animal Welfare and Ethics Committee requires ethics forms to be completed and submitted to the relevant School Ethics Committee (SEC) detailing all proposed work prior to such work being undertaken. This includes work that is using material from dead animals or unpublished data sets from collaborators. The rationale for this requirement includes allowing for provision of guidance to academics, to protect the welfare of animals, to minimize the occurrence of research that damages the reputation of individual academics or the university, and to provide formal ethical approval required for some grant applications and an increasing number of scientific journals. For projects that are carried out in the UK, it is possible that you will need a Home Office licence. These are studies that expose live animals to treatments that either induce pain or stress. This also includes repeated exposure to unpleasant stimuli, capture of animals or any invasive research. If you think your study falls into this category, check with the Home Office Liaison Officer at holo@st-andrews.ac.uk to see what approval you might need.

If you are not in this category (i.e. the project is not carried out in the UK, or there is no undue stress involved) you need to fill in the forms for un-licensed research.

These forms can be found at the biology website:

http://biology.st-andrews.ac.uk/ethicsCommittee.aspx

Please make sure to download these forms each time you apply for ethics approval since they are being refined regularly. The forms are relatively easy to fill in, and we provide some guidance below.

If you are not sure whether you require approval or not, please ask via bioethics@st-andrews.ac.uk.

Who can apply?

Applications should only come from staff members of the University of St Andrews. The main PI or PhD supervisor should always be the main applicant for the project.

What should I include in the description of the project?

A brief paragraph on the question that is being asked and why should start this summary. However, the most important information is what the animals will experience during the study. Sometimes it is easiest to present this information in a table. Here is what you need to include:

Species

If you don't plan to study all primates, don't write "primates". Be specific.

Number of animals involved

Give a likely number that you will use and a **maximum** number of target animals that you would like to be covered for.

Also include how many non-target animals are potentially disturbed by your activities?

Duration of involvement of each animal

Give an **average and a possible maximum.** If your project has different stages of involvement for the animal, give durations for each stage. An example is a tagging study in which there can be three stages (capture, tag attachment, and carrying the tag after release). Give durations for each of these. If you do playbacks of sounds, how many sounds will you play, how long is each sound and what is the interval between successive sounds?

Ages of animals involved

Don't write "all ages" if you are not planning to study newborns or dependent calves.If you work on dependent offspring, but you will not use very young animals, give a threshold such as "We will not use infants less than 1 year in age." If you include such a disclaimer let us know how you will assess age in your animals.

Decision thresholds

If you are trying to get close to an animal in the wild, give us a threshold for the maximum duration that you would follow an individual before you decide that you cannot get close enough. For example, in a tagging study that remotely attaches tags, we would like to know how long you are trying to get in range for tag attachment before you decide to switch to another animal if you are unsuccessful. Similarly, if you are following an animal on a focal follow, what is the maximum duration of such a follow? You should also think of thresholds in terms of animal reactions. If an animal reacts to tagging or being followed, what needs to happen for you to stop your follow or tagging altogether? For example, if an animal accelerates, is there a threshold speed beyond which you deem the reaction to indicate too much stress for the animal. Each study should have decision thresholds in place. How many animals can reach your threshold before you stop your study and change the design?

Re-use of animals

If you are approaching or treating the same animals repeatedly, let us know what the maximum number of approaches/treatments is for an individual. Also include what the minimum time interval is between repeated approaches/treatments.

Captive conditions

If you want to capture and keep animals, you need to include information on the husbandry conditions. This also applies to work on zoo animals. You should be confident that the animals are kept to the best possible standards and we would like to see information on what you decide are key parameters for keeping the animals and how these are met.

Do I need approval for studies on existing data or dead animals?

There is no need to apply for approval if you conduct a meta-analysis of published data or on animals that died of natural causes. However, if you work on data taken on living animals, an ethics approval is necessary, even if you were not involved in collecting the data and no matter how long ago the data were collected. If the data were collected under an ethics approval from another university, please let us know and attach a copy of the approval. If animals were killed by humans, please give information on whether they were killed for the study and how they were killed.

Will I get ethics approval for my study?

The ethics committee's role is to review the ethical considerations in place and to help develop them further if necessary. We are an "enabling" committee, trying to help you to arrive at the best possible research design for the question that is asked. We therefore may make suggestions for changes, always focussing on a good balance between ethical considerations and a strong scientific design. However, in most cases you will have come up with the best possible way of doing your research and your study design will not require any changes. In these cases, this process only ensures that the university is informed of the details of your study and provides formal approval to enable you to publish in journals that require internal ethics reviews before publication (e.g. *PNAS*, *Current Biology*). While the Biology SEC is reviewing your case and can provide you with an approval letter, all applications and decisions are also noted by the University Animal Ethics and Welfare Committee (AWEC). AWEC can theoretically withdraw an approval given at the school level, if it disagrees with the SEC's evaluation. However, this is an unlikely scenario. In difficult cases, the SEC may involve AWEC in the decision making process. Ultimately, the decision on what research can or cannot be conducted lies with the principal's office.

When should I apply?

The SEC currently accepts applications at any time, and will attempt to assess an application as quickly as possible. However, we recommend submitting an application as early as possible, ideally **at least 8 weeks before the start date of your project.** It would be wise to allow as much time as possible to obtain approval, since the committee often comes back to you with additional questions that need further assessment prolonging the procedure. We are unable to give retrospective approval to a project that has already started.