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1996

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Recommended Citation

Spira, H. (1996). Less meat, less misery: Reforming factory farms. In *Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy* (Vol. 11, pp. 39-44).

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Less Meat, Less Misery: Reforming Factory Farms

Henry Spira

You're right if you think the animal rights movement made a big splash in the 1970s and 1980s. Unfortunately, you're also right if you think that the big splash was only a drop in the bucket.

No matter how many industries are phasing out such draconian laboratory tests as the Draize rabbit-blinding and LD 50 death tests usually performed on rodents, we are largely neglecting 95 percent of the innocent animals who suffer and die each year in factory farms.

Here are the opening words of a 1993 full-page ad that Animal Rights International placed in publications such as *Animal People*, *Animals' Voice*, and *Bunny Huggers' Gazette* aimed at animal protectionists. Underneath a picture of a drop of water falling through the air into an empty bucket was the headline: "A reminder about what we've achieved in two decades."

Actually, the modern animal rights movement has reason to feel pleased with recent progress. In less than 20 years, it has transformed itself from a largely ineffectual and perennial loser into a force that is beginning to have an impact on corporate, scientific, and public policy. In fact, it has changed the way society views and treats animals.

The modern animal rights movement was launched by Peter Singer's 1975 manifesto, *Animal Liberation*, which frames animal rights as a logical extension of earlier movements for human rights.

Singer contends that it's wrong to harm others, and that we cannot set limits on who those others are. Whether particular animals are among the cute and the cuddly makes no difference. It is a matter of simple justice, not sentimentality. And unless we support the concept of tyranny, that might makes right, we cannot justify violating their bodies and minds.

Singer, in effect, provided a rational justification that rallied social activists and professionals to the cause. This new influx of talent helped the movement gain acceptance.

Societies worldwide only recently have accepted that all humans, regardless of sex, race, nationality, abilities, or religious beliefs, are entitled to equal consideration--that they have the right to not be harmed.

The next reasonable step in expanding the "circle of concern" is to include other species in the ring. Novelist Alice Walker concludes that "the animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for whites, or women for men." Animal rights likely will continue to gain credibility as a natural progression of desirable ethical standards.

From Lab to Farm

There's a growing awareness across the entire spectrum, from young to old, progressive to conservative, and rich to poor, that other animals are similar enough to humans to merit serious consideration.

In fact, it's one of the three issues generating the largest amount of congressional mail; the other two are potential medicare/Social Security cutbacks and the budget deficit. It has made the covers of major

publications and been the focus of national television programs. It has rapidly gained credibility and legitimacy as a movement that has a sensible underpinning, has political clout, and has made real and sustained progress. An estimated 50-percent reduction in the use of laboratory animals over the past decade is testimony to the movement's impact.

Animals that have been the prime targets of laboratory research have undoubtedly benefited from these trends. Fewer of them now face torturous, abbreviated lives.

Nevertheless, the number of laboratory animals used for testing pales compared to the number of farm animals produced for lunch and dinner.

When dealing with laboratory animals, one speaks in millions. The U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment estimated that between 17 and 22 million animals were used in biomedical research in 1984—of which 85 to 90 percent were rats and mice. When dealing with farm animals, one speaks of 7.5 billion raised for human consumption each year.

Today, as animal protectionists expand their focus to the suffering of farm animals, can the strategies that worked so well for laboratory animals in the 1970s and 1980s be successfully transferred to the billions of farm animals?

Past Progress

Answering this question will be easier if we first describe the progress made with laboratory animals over the past two decades and then attempt to sketch a picture of the gruesome life of today's factory farms.

In 1975, the emerging modern animal rights movement desperately needed a victory that could serve as a stepping stone to future progress. After much searching, we targeted a series of painful and we thought useless cat experiments that were performed at the prestigious American Museum of Natural History in New York City.¹ We tried to talk with museum officials. We worked the phones and mail. I even registered for a course in animal behavior at the museum, hoping to gain access to officials.

Museum officials refused to address our concerns; in fact, they refused to even speak with us. As a result, they forced us to launch a public-awareness campaign. We obliged with newspaper articles, full-page ads, appearances on radio talk shows, and demonstrations in front of the museum each weekend for 18 months.

Pressure on the museum grew to the point where 121 members of Congress questioned the National Institutes of Health about its funding of the cat experiments. The museum was vulnerable. The demonstrations were hurting its image and threatening its budget. People cancelled memberships and benefactors threatened to withdraw donations. The protests ended after the labs were dismantled.

The campaign saved the lives of just 60 cats. Nevertheless, it placed animal researchers on notice that citizens would hold researchers accountable for their treatment of animals and that there would be no public support for pain where there is no significant gain.

With growing confidence we then approached Revlon and urged the nation's most visible cosmetic company to fund the development of alternatives to the Draize eye test. The widely used Draize-test measures the irritancy of chemicals by the damage done in the eyes of conscious rabbits. We asked Revlon to put one-hundredth of 1 percent of its sales, which then totaled about \$1.5 billion, into research for alternative testing. We thought the public would find that request reasonable. Revlon did not.

The company was vulnerable because we were able to juxtapose the dream of beauty promised by Revlon with the nightmare faced by the rabbits that the company tested. Earlier, I had bought one share of Revlon stock, which gave me access to annual shareholders' meetings and thereby the opportunity to present our concerns directly to the top management.

Chief Executive Officer Michel Bergerac noted what I had to say but took no action. So we ran full-page ads in The New York Times asking, "How many rabbits does Revlon blind for beauty's sake?" This question struck a responsive chord with the public. Within a year, Revlon funded an alternative-research program at Rockefeller University in New York City at a cost greater than what we had originally suggested.

We bailed Revlon as a pioneer, welcomed them as an ally, and encouraged other companies to follow their lead. Within days, Avon agreed to provide an additional \$750,000, which helped launch the Center for Alternatives to Animal Testing at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Legitimacy and Progress

These events established the legitimacy and promise of the search for alternatives to animal testing. Since 1986, Procter & Gamble has spent more than \$14 million to develop alternative methods to animal testing; their researchers have published or presented more than 100 papers on alternatives. Hoffman-La Roche has reduced its use of animals by two-thirds over the past seven years. Colgate-Palmolive has publicly committed itself to the long-term goal of completely replacing the use of animals with alternative methods. And 10 years after being challenged, Revlon placed full-page ads publicizing its "Pure Skin Care" line with its "100% non-animal tested formula."

In focusing on the use of laboratory animals for research and testing, we applied the strategy of the "Three Rs"—that is, "replacing" the use of animals, "reducing" the number of animals used, and "refining" current procedures to reduce the pain and suffering.

The strategy has worked. During the past decade, an entirely new scientific discipline of *in vitro* (non-animal) toxicology has entered the scientific mainstream, and there has been a massive reduction in the use of laboratory animals. The movement towards alternatives has become self sustaining.

Down on the Farm

Once alternatives to laboratory animal testing had become widely implemented, we began thinking about expanding the cause from the tens of millions of laboratory animals to the billions of farm animals. In our 1988 *Coordinators Report*, we urged the animal protection community to adapt the Three R's to farm animal wellbeing. In this case, meat would be "replaced" or "reduced" in the diet, and factory farming methods would be "refined" to take into account the physical and behavioral needs of farm animals.

The public opposes cruelty to farm animals. But the violence that these animals endure has been hidden from public view.

Where does it take place? Behind closed factory doors, so that meat eaters are spared the screams. The bodies and minds of pigs, calves, and chickens are violated throughout their entire short and sad lives. Baby calves are separated from their mothers at birth and boarded up in crates so narrow they can't even turn around. Veal calves often cannot survive their allotted 16 weeks without drugs being pumped into them. When taken to slaughter, the veal calf is often so sick and weak that he must be dragged along the floor.

In vast egg-laying factories, hens live out their lives in a space smaller than this page, so immobilized that their feet sometimes grow around the wire mesh floor of their cages. If we treated our household animals like we treat our dinner animals, we'd be locked up and shown on the 6 o'clock news.

Ignorance of the realities of factory farming is compounded by the public's belief that animals are protected by the law. In a soon-to-be-published study, *Beyond The Law: Agribusiness and the Systemic Abuse of Farm Animals*, attorney David J. Wolfson notes that:

[w]hile the average person on the street may have the impression that, although we eat animals, laws prevent these animals from being treated cruelly, and may in fact think that the seeming rise of animal rights has gone too far, the reality is that more animals are presently treated more abusively than ever before

Federal law fails to provide any protection to farm animals on the farm. While all 50 states have anti-cruelty animal laws, half of these states exclude farming practices, no matter how cruel, as long as the act is customary, accepted, common, or normal.

The fact is that animal agriculture has largely been left to regulate itself. And where state cruelty laws cover farm animals, they are rarely, if ever, enforced. Meanwhile the number of states excluding farm animals from their anti-cruelty laws keeps increasing.

Altered States

Considering the enormity of the problem, can animal activists hope to make an impact on the system? One answer to that question is that change is already beginning to take place.

For decades, the well-being of farm animals has been a largely ignored issue. So it may come as a surprise that most Americans want farm animals to be protected from cruelty. This is the finding of a recent telephone survey of 1,012 adults by the Opinion Research Corporation of Princeton, New Jersey, for Animal Rights International.

The survey found that 93 percent of American adults agreed that animal pain and suffering should be reduced as much as possible even though the animals are going to be slaughtered anyway.

Nine out of 10 adult Americans also disapprove of current methods of raising food animals in spaces so confining that sows and calves can't even turn around and laying hens can't even stretch their wings.

With these concerns, it's hardly surprising that more than eight out of 10 people think the meat and egg industries should be held legally responsible for protecting farm animals from cruelty. And that 91 percent of adult Americans think the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) should be involved in protecting farm animals from cruelty.

What ultimately may encourage a response from corporate decision makers is that 58 percent of the public also believe that fast-food restaurants and supermarkets, which profit from factory intensive farming, should be held legally responsible for protecting farm animals from cruelty.

Some industry leaders, in fact, are beginning to remedy more than 50 years of ignoring the most basic needs of living animals. In 1992, the American Meat Institute issued groundbreaking guidelines promoting the humane handling and transport of animals, including a recommendation to replace shackling and hoisting with upright restrainer systems.

Shackling and hoisting involves placing a shackle around a conscious animal's back leg. After being shackled, the struggling animal, which may weigh more than 1,000 pounds, is hoisted into the air until fully suspended by that one leg. This practice, which has long been an urgent candidate for change, offered a challenging opportunity for animal protectionists to engage the industry in non-confrontational pressure and dialogue.

Instead of launching a negative public-awareness campaign, we quietly approached the chief executive officer of a major Midwestern meat packer who had invested considerable effort in upgrading his company's worker-safety record. We saw potential for common ground with this industry pioneer.

We met and discussed upright restrainer systems--a much less traumatic device developed in 1980 that was no longer experimental and commercially available. His reaction was to bring in top industry experts and phase out the shackling in a matter of weeks.

We had accomplished with a single meeting and a few letters and phone calls what decades of vitriolic campaigning had failed to do.

Unfortunately, the next meat packer ignored our repeated letters and phone calls. After feeling momentarily at a loss, we contacted their major customer, a nationally celebrated manufacturer of luncheon meats. We explained the problem and pointed out the incongruity between the cruel practice of shackling and hoisting and the company's inspirational advertising slogan.

The company's chief executive officer replied to my letter by promising to deal with the meat packer and keep us informed. When the supplier failed to respond with a sense of urgency and even appeared deceptive, the luncheon-meat company executive replaced the supplier with one who met the company's standards.

In another instance, a slaughter plant and its major customer, both of whom may have felt insulated from public opinion, also ignored us.

In this case, we were able to go to the customer's parent company, which enjoys a powerful national presence. We noted that widespread public awareness of this practice could tarnish its image. We suggested that the company view the option we presented as an opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to quality by insisting that those privileged to do business with them abide by the same high standards that they set for themselves. In rapid order we received a fax that the supplier would install upgraded, more humane equipment within 60 days.

Meat of the Matter

The one corporation that can set the pattern for the entire industry is McDonald's, the world's largest user of the products of animal agriculture. McDonald's gave us a great deal of access to corporate decision makers but has also sent mixed signals on its willingness to reform.

When it became unclear whether anything substantive would result, we joined forces with Franklin Research and Development Corporation, a socially responsible investment advisory firm. Together, we filed a shareholder resolution. This tactic resulted in intense negotiations until McDonald's agreed to publicly issue a statement requiring their suppliers to adhere to humane guidelines for the treatment of farm animals. McDonald's decision represents a fundamental breakthrough in corporate thinking.

The USDA is another major force with the potential to alter agribusiness's cruel treatment of animals. In early 1994, we launched a campaign asking the public to protest the expansion of the USDA disease-

control program's hot-iron face branding of imported Mexican steers to include all Mexican cattle. Within two days of running a full-page ad in *The New York Times*, the USDA received more than 1,000 calls. As a result, the department cancelled its plans; in fact, it proposed to end face branding of Mexican cattle altogether.

A second ad campaign asking the public to support this new USDA proposal generated more than 12,000 written comments to the USDA's regulatory office.

A sampling of the correspondence suggests that these writers represent a broad cross-section of the public, from grade-school students to Elizabeth Dole. Clearly, the USDA was impressed. On December 16, 1994, USDA officials signed a rule abolishing the requirement to face-brand the million steers imported each year from Mexico. However, a smaller number of domestic cattle continued to be face branded as part of national disease control programs.

Following our discussions with USDA decision makers, they proposed to end face branding of all domestic cattle. And on September 19, 1995, the Federal Register published the Final Rule achieving this goal. This completely eliminates the face branding of all cattle. We see this decision as a historic reversal of a 50-year trend of ever greater farm animal suffering.

We have responded to the USDA's responsiveness to public concerns with full-page "Thanks USDA!" ads in *The Washington Times* and in the animal-protection press. These ads opened additional doors by spotlighting the fact that we want to solve problems, not engage in needless confrontation.

USDA did not lose sight of the fact that much of the protest against face branding originated with ordinary citizens who had no previous involvement with animal protection issues. Moreover, it seemed that the public's concern was shared by significant sectors of USDA's leadership and staff. Our campaign ads were displayed on some USDA office walls, and we heard that a petition of support was circulated in a USDA field office.

As a result of the positive measures it has taken, USDA is now able to re-assess current practices and begin to provide leadership for solving welfare problems in animal agriculture. The decision to stop face branding affected about one million animals. USDA's decision to review farming practices across the board may eventually affect billions of animals.

On September 8, 1995, then USDA assistant secretary for marketing and regulatory programs, Patricia Jensen, held the first meeting of the USDA Interagency Animal Well-Being Task Force. The goal of the group is to develop voluntary guidelines to improve conditions for all farm animals.

Image Means a Lot

How did all this progress in the treatment of farm animals come about? Our strategies evolved from our laboratory animal campaigns of the previous decade. We seek to work through channels and when that's not possible, we look for vulnerabilities and leverage.

Corporations may be more vulnerable to advocacy campaigns than they realize. Image often is a corporation's major asset, and billions of industry dollars are spent on advertising and public relations to create and protect it.

When image-conscious corporations or public institutions are unresponsive to emerging concerns, they leave themselves open to well conceived campaigns. Here's our blueprint for change:

- Try to understand the public's current thinking and where it can be encouraged to go tomorrow. Above all, keep in touch with reality.
- Prioritize, set goals that are achievable, bring about meaningful change step by step.
- Establish credible sources of information and documentation, never assume anything, check everything out at the source.
- Don't deceive the media or the public. Maintain credibility, don't exaggerate, don't hype the issue.
- Select a target on the basis of vulnerabilities, the intensity of suffering, and the opportunities for change.
- Develop a campaign strategy that is realistic, practical, and doable.
- Seek dialogue and attempt to work together to solve problems. Position issues as problems with solutions.
- Be ready for confrontation if your target remains unresponsive; if accepted channels don't work, prepare an escalating public-awareness campaign to place your adversary on the defensive.

These tactics all fit within the context of the stepwise, incremental movement. Rather than day dreaming about perfect solutions, activists need to push for the most rapid progress that can realistically be achieved.

It's a process with constant movement. We keep building on previous achievements. We aim for initiatives that grow and proliferate and become self sustaining. Each action, each event is a step forward. And with each step forward, we can look further ahead.

Peaceful Dinners

Our ideal is a non-violent dinner table.

Wouldn't we all rather stroll through apple orchards than stumble through slaughterhouses? We actively and urgently encourage the public to upgrade to a meatless diet for ethical reasons. But the reality is that eating habits change slowly, and so we also promote part-time vegetarianism by eating fewer animals. And as long as people continue to consider animals as edibles, we will relentlessly pressure industry and government to develop, promote, and implement systems that reduce their suffering.

The animal rights movement's most effective role may be to highlight the scientific data regarding the health risks posed by meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products. The movement could contrast those risks with the healthfulness of fruits, vegetables, and grains. Such a strategy has the potential to influence large segments of the population much like the campaign against smoking did.

In addition to urging the public to reduce meat consumption, animal protectionists are negotiating with industry to refine current practices. We are urging mega users of meat products, such as Pepsico, Heinz, and Campbell Soup, to follow the lead of McDonald's and set standards for their suppliers.

We are also encouraging those who profit from the misery of farm animals to fund academic research, public policy, and information centers that will promote the well being of farm animals.

But words alone are not enough. They cannot bring the grim realities of factory farming to the public. As *The Economist* cover story in August 1995 observed, "What television did for the opponents of the Vietnam War the videocassette recorder has done for the animal-rights movement." While there's no shortage of visuals of lab animal horrors, the movement needs photos and videos documenting the suffering of billions of farm animals.

The face-branding campaign was swift and successful. What made the victory possible were actual photos of the faces of the steers being torched, to which the public responded with shock and outrage. The next step is to document the entire factory farming nightmare, and have it shown in every community from San Diego up to Maine.

How quickly will change come about? It's important to remember that the politically correct words and thoughts must be turned into action.

Right now, there's momentum to rapidly eliminate the worst abuses. Meanwhile our culture is increasingly receptive to the meatless and less-meat lifestyles. Meat appears to be following the tobacco trend-from chic and macho to pariah. The drops are accumulating and perhaps, in the not-too-distant future, we'll be able to look back and characterize our times as a tidal wave of change.

NOTE

1. Researchers mutilated the cats and then observed how such maiming affected their sexual performance.

Recommended Citation:

Spira, H. (1996). Less meat, less misery: Reforming factory farms. In *Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy* (Vol. 11, pp. 39-44).