Protecting Wildlife & Their Lands

Whether they inhabit suburban backyards, Western rangelands, or coastal waters, wild animals face grave dangers. When they’re not running scared from bulldozers, they may be dodging trophy hunters, poachers, killing contests, collisions with watercraft, or government officials wedded to lethal management practices. Even species who’ve adapted to altered urban environments face needless killing by inhumane wildlife control companies.

While our 101 permanently protected Wildlife Land Trust sanctuaries in the U.S. provide respite from these abuses, HSUS experts actively take on the worst cruelties through legislation, litigation, and a push for improved regulation. In 2009, we halted the slaughter of endangered Great Lakes wolves and helped mitigate the dangers facing North Atlantic right whales. Our efforts prompted many companies to go fur-free, spurred significant changes in labeling practices, and led to the passage of a fur labeling law in New Jersey.

Innovative HSUS partnerships with state wildlife agencies are ramping up the fight against poachers, while our work with local advocates is exposing the brutal practice of pitting hounds against captive foxes and coyotes. And even as we secure passage of animal-friendly laws such as Oregon’s ban on private possession of exotic animals, our state directors, campaign staff, and government affairs specialists are also tackling harmful proposals; we defeated measures that would have allowed contest kills and expanded bear hunting in California, for instance, and successfully challenged a controversial policy allowing hunting of endangered species at captive shooting facilities.

The HSUS helped convince the U.S. Interior Department to ban the import of sport-hunted polar bear trophies. And powerful friends like Rep. Nick Rahall, winner of our 2009 Humane Legislator of the Year award, helped amplify the voice for wild animals in Congress. As chair of the House Natural Resources Committee, the West Virginia Democrat has played a key role in the passage of 11 bills and serves as lead sponsor of legislation to reform the management program for wild horses and prevent their slaughter.

“Obviously, wildlife does not vote. But somebody needs to represent them,” Rahall says. “I feel that is a moral obligation.”
Ending the War on Wolves

After centuries of persecution put gray wolves on the federal endangered species list in 1974, these magnificent animals still occupy only 5 percent of their historic range in the continental U.S. But at the behest of ranching and trophy hunting interests, federal officials have repeatedly tried to reduce or remove the Endangered Species Act protections and abdicate wolf management to state agencies.

Seven times in five years, The HSUS and other organizations thwarted these attempts, most recently in summer 2009 when an HSUS-led lawsuit once again restored ESA status for Great Lakes wolves. But the fight is never-ending: Despite a pending suit to regain safeguards for the Northern Rockies population, the states of Montana and Idaho decided to proceed with wolf hunts. Never has an endangered species been delisted at such low numbers and then immediately hunted; even Yellowstone wolves, beloved by visitors to the national park, have been shown no mercy.

"Stripping these wolf populations of federal protection just as they have begun to bounce back could destroy decades of expensive and wide-ranging recovery efforts," says Jonathan Lovvorn, HSUS vice president and chief counsel for animal protection litigation and research. "The HSUS will continue the legal fight to preserve federal protection for wolves until we are certain they won’t face mass slaughter at the hands of hostile state wildlife authorities."

Wildlife Land Trust: A Place to Call Home

The first piece of private ground touched by Missouri River headwaters is the Roaring Creek Ranch, encompassing nearly 280 acres at the high end of Montana’s Centennial Valley. The property is a haven for nearly every native Western wildlife species, including antelopes, mule deer, moose, grizzly and black bears, gray wolves, wolverines, coyotes, peregrine falcons, and trumpeter swans.

Tony Demetriades and his wife purchased the land in the 1970s; more than 30 years later, they were looking for a way to protect the property and its wild inhabitants permanently.

"You borrow this grand space for a while and make it feel like your own," Demetriades says. "And yet you know that it’s not really yours. We feel very strongly that this land should always stay the way it is."

In 2009, this conviction led the couple to assign conservation easements to the Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust—the only national land trust that carries out the wishes of landowners by prohibiting all hunting and trapping on protected properties.

The 101st property protected by the WLT, the Demetriades Wildlife Sanctuary has a varied landscape, including wetlands, prairie, and mountainous areas. It serves as a natural corridor for migrating animals, connecting them with nearby open spaces and a neighboring national wildlife refuge.

While the couple could have sold the land to a developer for a hefty profit, they don’t regret their choice. "It’s different when you deny yourself things to accomplish greater objectives," Demetriades says. "We’re willing to do with less to do something good."
PARTNERS AGAINST POACHING

Bears killed for their gallbladders and other body parts, deer shot from roadsides and dumped in suburban neighborhoods, bald eagles peppered with lead shot—the nation’s game wardens have seen it all.

No species is off limits to poaching, and experts estimate that tens of millions of our nation’s wild animals fall victim to these crimes each year. But catching the perpetrators is difficult, particularly in financially strapped states where a single warden may be assigned to patrol hundreds of square miles.

For the Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife Division, the job got a little easier in October 2009, when a robotic elk donated by The HSUS and its Wildlife Land Trust helped bust a convicted felon who shot at the artificial animal from a vehicle. High-tech decoys help combat illegal killings because they “put the officer and the violator in the same place at the same time,” says the division’s Lt. Steven Lane.

Our partnerships with state wildlife enforcement agencies also include grants for innovative anti-poaching programs; one in California trains rescued dogs to sniff out the trail of evidence left behind by poachers. In 2009 we offered tens of thousands of dollars in tipster rewards, which heightened awareness and helped bring convictions in several cases: the killing of a deer in Oregon whose headless body was dumped on a street corner; the slaughtering of an alligator in Georgia whose body parts were sawed off; and the shooting of a black bear cub in Florida.

“We still continue to have a faction of people who think it’s their God-given right to go out and kill wildlife,” Lane says. But law-abiding hunters and nonhunters “want a common goal—to protect wildlife.”
TAKING FUR OFF THE RACKS OF MAJOR RETAILERS

While the use of fur in clothing might seem like obvious cruelty, even many in the fashion industry don’t realize how much animals suffer in the process of becoming coats, decorative trim, and accessories.

Gilberto Alvarez, a recent graduate of the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, used to believe fur may have been harvested from animals who died of natural causes in the wild. During a presentation at his school by The HSUS’s Fur-Free Campaign, Alvarez learned the truth: Millions of raccoon dogs, rabbits, foxes, minks, chinchillas, and other animals live their whole lives in wire cages before being subjected to inhumane neck-breaking, electrocution, live skinning, and other horrible deaths. “I always talk about it now,” he says. “And I always tell people they should watch the video, and I send them to the website and try to open them up to it.”

While promoting compassionate couture to future fashion designers like Alvarez, we’ve also continued to uncover consumer deception. With HSUS undercover cameras in tow, New York Assemblymember Linda Rosenthal visited some of the largest New York City retailers in 2009 and was disappointed to find many unlabeled fur-trimmed garments in violation of a 2007 state law she had authored. “Many people prefer not to wear animal fur, and they should be able to tell at a glance whether an article of clothing is made with fur or not,” she said. “Retailers have had more than a year to comply with the law, and it is appalling that so many have disregarded it.”

But other companies have gotten the message. JCPenney, one of several retailers at the center of our 2006 investigation into fur labeling and advertising, became the first traditional department store to end all fur sales. In response to our lawsuits, Lord & Taylor and Andrew Marc agreed to phase out raccoon dog fur from U.S. stores. And by early 2010, Saks Incorporated, Bloomingdale’s, and Macy’s had agreed to endorse federal legislation to close a loophole that now allows many fur-trimmed items to be sold without proper labels. Saks and Bloomingdale’s also committed to strict new garment labeling and advertising policies to help consumers make more humane choices.
When Florida’s wildlife agency was allowing gopher tortoises—now officially a threatened species in the state—to be buried alive on construction sites by the tens of thousands, The Humane Society of the United States stepped in to help end the practice. The HSUS’s involvement has also been instrumental in saving 1,800 tortoises from a slow, horrible death. … The HSUS’s collaboration not only with environmental groups, but with members of the development industry as well, continues to be a lifesaving force for these beleaguered reptiles, and we couldn’t have done it without them.

—Matt Aresco, conservation director, Nokuse Plantation

House Calls: Helping Homeowners and Their Unexpected Guests

When Laura Bachman realized that a skunk family was trapped between the walls of her suburban Virginia home, she turned to the phone book but was disheartened to see companies that promised to trap and remove the animals—a virtual death sentence. Around the country, “nuisance” wildlife control operations unnecessarily kill untold numbers of creatures or relocate them to new territories, where they face slim chances of survival.

“I like animals, and I didn’t want to see anything that would harm them,” says Bachman, a high school teacher and mother of three. “And I didn’t want my little girls to see something like that.”

Instead, Bachman called The HSUS’s Humane Wildlife Services program. After determining that the animals were unable to leave from whence they’d come—through an opening in the house’s foundation—she cut a hole in the drywall of her closet and propped a wooden board against the window as a potential escape route. They ate the food she left out but then returned into hiding. When HWS director John Griffin arrived on the scene, he cut a larger hole in the wall and crawled in to rescue the animals.

It was all in a day’s work for HWS, which has helped about 4,000 animals in its first three years of operation—freeing squirrel families from attics, reuniting baby raccoons with their mothers, and removing possums trapped behind gutters. To keep animals from coming back, HWS also advises homeowners on the use of chimney caps, vent covers, and other prevention methods.

The goal is simple: to help human families in a way that keeps wild families together. Using innovations such as “reunion boxes” and temporary one-way doors that let wild animals leave structures but not return, HWS has had a nearly 100-percent success rate. At Bachman’s home, Griffin carefully corralled the siblings and shepherded the mother into a separate box. He then sealed the opening in the foundation and released the family back to their original home for the season—a cozy spot under the front stoop.

Safer Waters for a Species on the Brink

As they feed, play, and sleep at the water’s surface, North Atlantic right whales are difficult to see. Too often, their vulnerability leads to stories like that of Calvin, orphaned at 8 months when her mother was fatally struck by a ship. Calvin later survived entanglement in fishing gear—a common danger to her besieged species, which inhabits the heavily trafficked and fished waters off the Eastern seaboard. Named by scientists with the New England Aquarium in Boston, the plucky animal is one of about 350 remaining North Atlantic right whales, a species so endangered that even one death edges it closer to extinction. Calvin and her kin got a break in 2009 when the National Marine Fisheries Service—in response to HSUS litigation—finally implemented regulations requiring fishing gear modifications to reduce entanglement-related risk to these critically endangered mammals. The HSUS also submitted a petition to the NMFS to expand the whales’ critical habitat.
Pairing Up for Prairie Dogs

Prairie dogs play an essential role in the ecosystem; about 200 vertebrate species are associated in some form with these gregarious native creatures and the intricate warrens they build underground. But not everyone appreciates them, and they’re often subjected to poisoning, shooting, and bulldozing of their colonies. In 2009, The HSUS solidified its efforts to stop these cruelties by bringing the Prairie Dog Coalition under its auspices. The move builds on the two organizations’ longtime collaboration on projects such as reducing poisoning and combating lethal plague in South Dakota’s Conata Basin—which houses the largest remaining colony on public lands in the Great Plains—as well as promoting commonsense solutions to conflicts between prairie dogs and landowners.

Shutting Down an Indefensible “Sport”

A few months after the wooded tract bordering their Florida home was leased to a fox and coyote pen operation, Christin Tank realized something was terribly wrong. She witnessed terrified coyotes being ripped apart by hounds, and, more times than she can recall, heard the sounds of animals on a kill.

Enclosed in electrical fencing, the site had been turned into a staged arena—a place where captured foxes and coyotes serve as live bait for packs of dogs. While Tank and her family aren’t opposed to traditional hunting, they let their new neighbors know they were deeply disturbed by the senseless suffering. “I was crying and told them that … this is wrong and I have children who should not have to witness this,” Tank says.

Despite the blatant cruelty, these operations exist throughout the Southeast; North and South Carolina have more than 100 permitted pens each. The HSUS has been working with local activists like Tank to shut them down, and in 2009, the efforts began to pay off. Statewide investigations of fox pens in Florida led to a temporary ban on new facilities while the state’s Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission considers a new policy.

In South Carolina, our Wildlife Abuse Campaign worked with local communities to prevent new pens from opening and defeated legislation that would have allowed the use of black bears in the state’s existing pen operations. Minnesota and Indiana also restricted the trade in live animals to be used as bait in fox and coyote pens; these animals are often transported in cramped trucks over long distances to meet cruel deaths.

2009 Impact: 14 states pass legislative protections for wildlife, including increases in penalties for poaching, bans on Internet hunting, requirements for more accurate fur labeling, and prohibitions on exotic animal possession / 101 U.S. properties totaling nearly 15,000 acres protected by the Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust; 1.8 million acres protected through our partnerships worldwide / 1,200 animals saved by Humane Wildlife Services / 4,300 phone calls fielded by our wildlife experts, guiding thousands of homeowners to resolve problems without killing or orphaning animals / 7th successful lawsuit on behalf of wolves in five years, this time to restore Endangered Species Act protections to those in the Great Lakes / 100+ designers, retailers, and brands added to our fur-free shopping list, bringing the total to nearly 300 / 20 fashion design schools showcasing HSUS fur-free presentations