

Making a World of Difference

As a 17-year-old in Bedfordshire, England, Philip Lymbery planned to someday run a wildlife sanctuary, his fascination with animals piqued by a book on wild birds his grandfather had given him. But that all changed one Friday afternoon, with a classroom presentation by a group named Compassion in World Farming.

Lymbery listened intently to stories of calves confined to tiny veal crates and of hens stashed in cramped cages, unable to even stretch their wings. “I guess that was the turning point of my life,” he says. “That was when I decided that I needed to get involved and help save animals from cruelty.”

Get involved he did. After joining CIWF as a campaigns assistant in 1990, Lymbery rose through the ranks to become chief executive 15 years later.

Along the way, he’s led a successful campaign for an EU ban on confinement of egg-laying hens in barren cages, and he’s persuaded supermarkets and other food companies to adopt better animal welfare policies. From across the Atlantic, he’s also followed the factory farming fight in the U.S., acknowledging that “we cheered from our tabletops here in the U.K.” when Californians voted in 2008 to ban veal crates, gestation crates, and battery cages. Associate editor Michael Sharp spoke recently with Lymbery for this excerpted interview.



Q: You’ve been in the fight a long time. How have you seen it evolve?

LYMBERY: The farm animal welfare issue has gone from being a marginal Cinderella issue to being a mainstream concern that is increasingly being seen as not just an animal cruelty issue but also an issue of food quality. I’ve seen in Europe the campaign go through a golden age of legislative reform, of legal reform, where we went on a roll and got bans, first in the U.K. and then in Europe, on veal crates and sow stalls. We got a European ban on barren battery cages. We got animals recognized in European law as sentient beings. And in what feels like something of a post-reformist era, we’re now seeing a momentous trend amongst food companies to take up higher welfare policies, such as going cage-free on the eggs in the U.K. and Europe.

Unfortunately, I have to temper that by saying that while we’ve had great success in dismantling the cage and crate aspect of factory farming, [we still have] the intensive breeding and feeding regimes, such as making chickens grow so fast that their legs buckle under them, and dairy cows produce so much milk that they’ve experienced metabolic hunger. Factory farming’s taken on a different shape. And the issue is as big, if not bigger, today than at any other time in history in Europe.

Q: Before CIWF founder Peter Roberts died in November 2006, you spoke to him about The HSUS’s Arizona ballot initiative ban-

ning veal crates for calves and gestation crates for pigs. What was that moment like?

LYMBERY: Mr. Roberts was lying in his hospital bed with his family around. He hadn’t responded for hours. I came into the room, and I started telling him about the fantastic victory that HSUS had scored. And he opened his eyes and listened intently for a full two minutes as I told him all of these details. Because one of the things that he so much wanted to see was the work that he had started in Europe also being replicated in the United States. So that was a very moving moment for the family, and I think it’s testimony to how important the success of the ballot initiatives in the States really is.

Q: You’ve said that increasing scarcity of resources means factory farming is reaching its very own sell-by date?

LYMBERY: Factory farming is very resource-intensive; it’s very hungry for grain to feed the farm animals that are taken off a pasture and then put indoors, [and for] water—not only to allow the animals to drink, but even more in terms of irrigation for the crops to feed the animals with. And a little-known fact is that industrial livestock production is underpinned by the use of copious amounts of oil to produce artificial fertilizers and pesticides.

By the middle of this century, there’ll be 9 billion people. Livestock numbers are set to nearly double. At the same time, we’re going to go

**STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP,
MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION**
(All Periodicals Publications Except Requester Publications)

1. Publication Title: All Animals
2. Publication Number: 1948-3597
3. Filing Date: 9/14/2010
4. Issue Frequency: Bimonthly
5. Number of Issues Published Annually: 6
6. Annual Subscription Price: \$3.60
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: 700 Professional Dr., Gaithersburg, MD 20879
8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: 700 Professional Dr., Gaithersburg, MD 20879
9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor
 Publisher: Nancy Lawson, 700 Professional Dr., Gaithersburg, MD 20879
 Editor: Nancy Lawson, 700 Professional Dr., Gaithersburg, MD 20879
 Managing Editor: Angela Moxley, 700 Professional Dr., Gaithersburg, MD 20879
10. Owner: The Humane Society of the United States, 700 Professional Dr., Gaithersburg, MD 20879
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: None
12. Tax Status. The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes: Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months.
13. Publication Title: All Animals
14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: September/October 2010

15. Extent and Nature of Circulation	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
a. Total number of copies (Net press run)	511,718	569,839
b. Paid Circulation (By Mail and Outside the Mail)		
1) Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)	504,678	562,359
2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)	0	0
3) Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS	840	1,280
4) Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail)	0	0
c. Total Paid distribution (Sum of 15b (1), (2), (3), and (4))	505,518	563,639
d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail)		
1) Free of Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies included on PS Form 3541	0	0
2) Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541	0	0
3) Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail)	0	0
4) Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means)	5,800	5,800
e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (Sum of 15d (1), (2), (3) and (4))	5,800	5,800
f. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c and 15e)	511,318	569,439
g. Copies not Distributed (See Instructions to Publishers #4 (page #3))	400	400
h. Total (Sum of 15f and g)	511,718	569,839
i. Percent Paid (15c divided by 15f times 100)	99%	99%

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over peak land and peak oil, because at just the time when we're going to need more land to grow crops to feed people and the burgeoning population of farm animals—most of whom are kept in factory farms—temperature rise will see to it that land will disappear as the sea rises.

So that's why we need to rechart a course towards humane and sustainable farming, whereby the rich world, the Western world, reduces its meat consumption, where we move away from grain-fed, factory-farmed animals to fewer animals, [whom we keep] in high-welfare conditions on pasture and in forests. The sooner we accept it, the better it will be for farm animals that are enduring unimaginable suffering, as well as for the world's people.

Q: How do you reach those who might not agree with factory farming but have an out-of-sight, out-of-mind attitude about the issues?

LYMBERY: Part of it is exposing the horrors of factory farming on the TV. The other is offering the feel-good factor of the positive. For example, demonstrating the fact that food that has been produced using better welfare—such as free-range eggs, for example, in Europe—will most likely deliver a better food quality.

In the 1970s, chicken meat was launched onto the mass market as a healthy white meat, and in the public consciousness, it still is today. What is not so well known is that the cheap, ubiquitous supermarket chicken is now nearly three times higher in fat than it was in the '70s, is a third less in protein. That is through the increasing intensification of production, the animals being made to grow faster and bigger in factory farms.

If you take a chicken raised under U.K. organic standards and compare it today to the factory farm/supermarket chicken, the organic bird will be 25 percent less fat. So a key ingredient to the strategy here is to show people the positives for them, as well as for the animals, of making humane choices.

Q: You recently described on Twitter a fact-finding visit to higher welfare farms in the Netherlands. What were you looking for?

LYMBERY: What I was looking for was new and novel ways, for example, of keeping laying hens, particularly in countries that don't have a lot of land. And what I found was a cage-free system that allows birds—while it's not having wide-open free-ranging access—the effect of living in a barn with no sides, where they can experience natural light, natural ventilation, where they can feel real soil under their feet. Where they can dust-bathe, where they can perch, where they can nest, where they can do all the things that hens like to do. I saw hens behaving more enthusiastically than I've ever seen hens before in a commercial system. And that gave me encouragement that we can not only get hens out of cages, but that we can give them a better life.

Q: What is the idea behind CIWF's Good Eggs campaign?

LYMBERY: Go back to the '90s, and as campaigns director, I would stand outside company headquarters and shout through the megaphone, calling on them to stop using battery eggs, for example. The tactic was fun; it raised the profile of the issue, but seldom did it get companies to change. Now in the 21st century, we simply ring companies up and ask them if they want to do something good and beneficial for their company, for their customers, and for animals. What's more, they can win an award for doing it. Our engagement with companies over the last four years now has resulted in 25 million laying hens a year benefiting from a cage-free existence.

Q: So, there's someone out there reading this, and one of your answers strikes them just like that classroom presentation struck you in 1983. How can they get involved?

LYMBERY: I would recommend supporting your favorite animal organization, such as HSUS or Compassion in World Farming, ensuring that you're well-informed about what humane choices look like, and helping by making sure that everything that goes in your shopping basket helps bring an end to animal suffering. And always remember that with enough of us getting involved, with enough determination, change really is possible.