CURRENTS OF CHANGE

BY SNAIL MAIL OR SOCIAL MEDIA, HSI KEEPS THE PRESSURE ON COMPANIES PROFITING FROM CRUELTY // BY EMILY SMITH

SIMPLY TELLING A JAPANESE COMPANY NAMED AEON to stop selling whale and dolphin meat in hundreds of its grocery stores would’ve been a whisper across the ocean. So, in 2001, Humane Society International and its partners asked customers of one of AEON’s U.S. holdings to help turn up the volume.

And boy, did they. It turns out the women who shopped at Talbots were rather disgusted to learn the parent company of their beloved clothing store contributed to the slaughter of protected animals.

“They mailed in thousands and thousands of these postcards that we put in magazines, to the point where the Talbots CEO called the Japanese company and asked them to meet with us,” says HSI vice president Kitty Block, who spearheaded the campaign with the Environmental Investigation Agency and Greenpeace.

AEON yanked whale and dolphin products from its stores, and “we have a great relationship with them now,” Block says. “They do good work and continue to do the right thing.”

Thirteen years later, tweets, Facebook shares and online petitions have replaced those snail-mail postcards, making HSI and EIA’s corporate campaigns even more effective.

Google, eBay, Wal-Mart and Amazon have all ordered their Japanese subsidiaries to stop selling and advertising whale meat, which is legal in Japan. Rakuten—the Japanese e-commerce giant that recently purchased Buy.com—banned whale and dolphin products and ads, as have the parent companies of 7-Eleven and Gorton’s (yes, the brand with the fisherman in a yellow slicker). The latter’s parent has since quit the whaling business.

Unfortunately, other companies still profit from cruelty. Yahoo Japan advertises thousands of ivory products and hundreds of other products derived from dolphins and whales—mostly great whale species, such as fin and sei.

HSI and EIA have been pressuring Yahoo Inc. to take a stand, but the response has been disappointing, Block says. HSI would like to see U.S.-based Yahoo Inc., a major shareholder in Yahoo Japan,
assert more pressure to safeguard the Yahoo name.

Appeals directly to the CEOs of SoftBank, the other major shareholder, and Yahoo Japan have been unsuccessful, says HSI Wildlife program assistant Adam Peyman, who speaks Japanese and serves as a translator for the interactions. “When all is said and done, they don’t care,” he says. “It’s ridiculous; it’s just bad business.”

In such a competitive marketplace, image matters, Peyman says. If consumers know that Yahoo contributes to whale slaughter and Google doesn’t, their logical choice is Google. But, even with someone who speaks the language, persuading major corporations to do the right thing can be tricky.

Particularly when the government has made it an issue of national pride, says Rebecca Regnery, deputy director of HSI Wildlife. The younger generation is not interested in consuming whale and dolphin meat, she says, but a few powerful government officials push companies to sell the subsidized products.

So HSI often emphasizes that the products are more than inhumane—they’re unhealthy. Mercury levels in whale and dolphin meat are often more than 16 times above the Japanese allowable limit for consumption. In short, Regnery says, they can be poisonous.

Still, Yahoo Japan hasn’t budged. At least, not yet.

“Big companies like these care what customers think of them,” Peyman says. “Send a letter, sign a petition, spread the word. The public’s reaction makes our action even stronger.”

+ TO ASK Yahoo Japan to stop advertising ivory and whale and dolphin meat, go to hsi.org/askyahoo.

BASHING THE GAS
THE HSUS IS WORKING TO END SHELTERS’ USE OF GAS CHAMBERS
// BY RUTHANNE JOHNSON

THE GAS CHAMBER at Heber Valley Animal Shelter in Utah was once the bane of Justin Hatch’s existence.

The shelter’s executive director inherited the task of euthanizing animals after being hired in 2000. The gas chamber was a constant reminder of the black lab he’d lost as a kid after the dog had been picked up and possibly euthanized by animal control. “It was devastating,” he remembers, “and I told my mom that I wanted to change how animal control did things.”

On June 12, he did just that: Shelter staff removed the gas chamber and drove it to Heber City Park for a “Bash the Gas” event sponsored by The HSUS and Paws for Life Utah. Dozens of community members took turns with the sledgehammer that day: police officers, city officials, children, even a pregnant woman. For Hatch, the moment was cathartic even though the chamber hadn’t been used in years. “Every time I hit that thing was like hitting a home run,” he says.

The moment marked another stride in The HSUS’s push to eliminate gas chambers. Of the 27 states where they’re still legal, 10 have chambers in active use.

“The animals are placed in a box that’s dark, small and completely unfamiliar to them,” says Inga Fricke, HSUS director of shelter and rescue group services. “Animals that are very old, very young or ill may experience pain and distress trying to process the gas. To be humane, death must be pain-free and stress-free—the gas chamber simply can’t meet this standard.”

When animals must be euthanized, generally in cases of severe injury or sickness, euthanasia drugs make the process quick, painless and virtually stress free. To that end, The HSUS has given grants to 17 shelters since 2013 to help them transition to euthanasia by injection. Several more have voluntarily eliminated their chambers over that time. In North Carolina alone, HSUS state director Kim Alboum has helped nearly a dozen shelters close their chambers. The HSUS has also successfully helped push for gas chamber bans in several states.

The grant money works to enrich the lives of shelter animals as well. Heber Valley, for example, is using its grant to transform the gassing room into a kitty quarantine or feral cat room. There are other benefits too, Alboum says: “When you have a shelter that’s gassing, the community doesn’t want to go there. Once it’s gone, there’s a higher level of trust.”

That’s what happened in Brunswick County, North Carolina. Since removing its gas chamber, the shelter has expanded its database to 200 volunteers. It has behavior training programs and an agility yard. It works with rescues to find homes for hard-to-adopt animals. “It’s a good place for animals and the community,” Alboum says. “And it all started with getting rid of the gas chamber.”

Colton Furnish, 10, takes a swing at Heber Valley’s old gas chamber.
IN THE EARLY 1950S, the naturalist, photographer and author Lewis Wayne Walker discovered a wild rat running on a rodent exercise wheel he had stored in his barn. I found this endearing anecdote while researching my book Pleasurable Kingdom: Animals and the Nature of Feeling Good, where I suggested putting exercise wheels (instead of traps) in wild rodents’ haunts to see what happens.

Lo and behold, someone’s done it! In 2009, a Dutch research team started placing wheels in two habitats along with remote sensors and night vision cameras. Over the next three years they recorded 12,000 instances of wheel rotations made by mice, shrews, rats, frogs and slugs. Most were young mice. They only ran and never walked, often for over a minute and sometimes up to 18 minutes. Initially, the scientists drew animals to the site by putting out food, but wheel running continued when they stopped doing this. Some ran, hopped off for a few minutes and then returned.

The authors concluded that the mice—and probably some of the other species—ran for fun. Caged rodents often use the wheels, which might help relieve boredom and lack of exercise. But wild rodents presumably suffer neither of these deficits. It says much about the adventuresome, rewarding lives of wild creatures that they will voluntarily try something with no obvious survival benefit and return for more.

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LEGISLATIVE HORSEPOWER
THE HSUS FIGHTS TO PROTECT A KEY PROVISION FOR HORSES // BY MICHAEL SHARP

IT REMAINS one of the most important sentences in the animal protection movement.

Without a federal law in place to outright ban horse slaughter in the United States, The HSUS works to protect what’s known as the “defund language”—a provision in the federal appropriations law that prohibits USDA funds from being used to inspect horse slaughter plants.

Without the inspections, the plants can’t operate.

“The importance of this is to keep horse slaughter off U.S. soil and to keep these plants shut,” says Holly Gann, who manages the HSUS campaign against horse slaughter. Americans don’t consume horsemeat, she adds, noting that it’s instead shipped overseas to Europe and Asia.

Three plants operated in the U.S.—one in Illinois, two in Texas—when the HSUS-supported amendment defunding inspections was first added to the agriculture appropriations bill for fiscal 2006. The language was included in every budget until fiscal 2012, when it was stripped out during conference committee by new chairman Jack Kingston, a Georgia Republican and horse slaughter proponent.

It remained out in 2013 because of politics: When Congress couldn’t agree on a budget, it approved a funding resolution that essentially kept everything in place from the year before. Three new slaughter plants were preparing to open, but The HSUS, along with Front Range Equine Rescue and several individual plaintiffs, helped hold them off by suing the USDA for failure to conduct the necessary environmental review and winning a series of injunctions.

In January 2014, thanks in part to a flurry of advocates contacting their legislators, the defund language was restored, shifting the status quo back to a prohibition against horse slaughter inspections. The HSUS is now fighting harmful amendments that could override the prohibitory language and allow plants to open.

The grave concerns inherent in slaughtering horses start with their transport—long rides in overcrowded trailers without food or water that can often lead to serious injuries, even death. As skittish flight animals, horses also can’t be stunned humanely with commonly used devices like captive bolt guns. They swing their heads. They struggle to escape. Often, they’re struck repeatedly before finally being rendered unconscious.

Food safety is also at stake, notes Jessica Feingold-Lieberson, HSUS senior federal legislative specialist. “Horses aren’t raised for food. They’re treated with all kinds of chemicals and drugs that are not meant for human consumption.”

To further protect horses and consumers, The HSUS is also fighting for the Safeguard American Food Exports Act, which would ban domestic horse slaughter outright and prohibit the export of U.S. horses to plants in Canada, Mexico and elsewhere abroad.

Says Gann, “The SAFE Act would ensure that no American horses are ever sent to slaughter, anywhere.”

TO URGE your legislators to support the SAFE Act, please visit humanesociety.org/safe.