



KINSHIP CIRCLE

PERSPECTIVE ANIMAL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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by Brenda Shoss

As an animal rights (AR) activist I've endured my share of harsh critics, from the smart-alecky to the magnificently peeved. Mainly, I've survived really bad one-liners: "Vegetable have feelings too you know," or "So you think insects should have the right to vote?"

"Get a life," the uninformed inform me as they inspect my no-animal attire for the hypocritical leather shoe or belt. Skeptics often suggest that I save babies instead of animals. Why not both? If every couch-potatoed critic would grab a sign or write a letter, we'd create one powerful voice for the innocent.

Ringside cynics don't concern me. But the new wave of anti-AR propaganda does. In "The Evil of Animal Rights," authors Alex Epstein and Yaron Brook of The Ayn Rand Institute typify history's paranoid reaction to change. They represent a growing contingent who berate animal rights activists. "To attribute rights to animals is to ignore the purpose and justification of rights—to protect the interests of man," the writers contend. "Animal 'rights'—which demand man's destruction—are the antithesis of rights. This is pure man-hatred."

Man-hatred? Sounds more like philosophical poppycock to me. Nonetheless, fear propels prejudice and animal-rights haters are justifiably nervous. Society's infrastructure relies upon animals. If we were to spontaneously erect retirement sanctuaries for all animals used in food, research, entertainment or clothing, our animal-dependent civilization might collapse.

Animal liberty is the right of each species to live freely among its own kind. AR-haters envision an overnight revolution in which unshackled beasts overrun the planet and, according to Epstein and Brook, "destroy our property, eat our food, even kill our children." Such sinister forecasts are buried in intellectual reverie. All significant reforms—industrial, technological, political or social—span decades or centuries, as society is able to integrate them. Slow-trickle evolution occurs as entire generations gain consciousness and shift values.

In fact, the idea of inherent rights for non-human animals has been around for awhile. Abraham Lincoln said: "I am in favor of animal rights as well as human rights. That is the way of a whole human being." Leonard Da Vinci prophesied the day "when men such as I will look upon the murder of animals as now they look upon the murder of men." Thomas Edison, another famous vegetarian, declared: "Until we stop harming all other living beings, we are still savage."



In any age, iconoclasts who rock the mainstream boat instill hatred and fear. Abolitionists, the 19th century edition of animal-rights "wackos," wouldn't accept the institutionalized domination of sentient beings. Slaveowners, however, dubbed Africans and their descendants a soulless species incapable of comprehending bondage. Slavery's proponents could not visualize human progress without the master-slave hierarchy.

Gary Yourofsky, founder of the animal advocacy group ADAPTT, compares the AR movement to numerous other moral uprisings. Whether the aggrieved fought to end slavery, religious persecution, women's suffrage or civil injustice the oppressed always outnumbered the oppressors. "That is how all revolutions happen, for humans and nonhumans," he says.

Even as Epstein and Brook dub animal-rights ethics a "formula for human extinction," and fellow Ayn Rand Institute author Michael S. Berliner warns that "a more malevolent, man-hating philosophy is unimaginable," the AR movement stubbornly advances.

PETA is now a household word. Hundreds of other watchdog groups expose suffering inside factory farms, fur ranches, research labs, circuses, zoos, rodeos, and puppy mills. Ten years ago, litigators didn't convict animal abusers with felony penalties. Supermarkets weren't stocked with soy substitutes for meat and dairy items. Today's no-animal circuses were unheard of. And the Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Validation of Alternative Methods wasn't around to develop and validate non-animal research alternatives.

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The AR voice is also heard in Congress and at the polls. *Campaigns & Elections* magazine rated last year's animal-protection measures the leading referendum themes nationwide, in front of new drug programs, school vouchers, health-care improvements and others.

The 106th U.S. Congress assessed a record-breaking 15 pro-animal bills. Among those passed, the Dog and Cat Fur Ban outlaws the transport and sale of dog and cat fur products. Profit from "crush videos," (in which high-heeled women pulverize kittens, hamsters, chicks and turtles) is illegal. The Great Ape Conservation Act assures grants to protect endangered chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans from habitat destruction and poaching. The CHIMP Act institutes sanctuaries for retired research chimpanzees languishing in federally funded laboratories. Overall it was a good year for manatees, military dogs, police horses, sharks, mink, double-crested cormorants, stranded marine mammals and pets-on-planes—all of whom gained immunity from commercial exploits, abuse or hunting.

To achieve legislative and social reform, most activists are armed with little more than pens, computers, pamphlets and big mouths. The media trigger anxiety when they inflate isolated acts of animal rights violence. There are always extremists within any coalition. To malign a primarily peaceful movement for its few dissidents is no different than condemning all law enforcers for the corrupt actions of a few.

In "The Evil of Animal Rights," Epstein and Brook call SHAC (Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty) a terrorist-affiliated group who want to destroy the medical testing industry. But they fail to mention that Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS), a mismanaged laboratory ejected from the New York Stock Exchange, is responsible for an annual 180,000 animal deaths. In one HLS poisoning experiment, workers punched beagle puppies and flung them against walls. In another presumably post-mortem dissection, a technician sliced open the chest of a convulsing monkey. Last year, an investigation exposed HLS employees who were regularly intoxicated or stoned. Such tests are non-essential "for the development of life-saving drugs and medical problems," as the authors assert. They go on to estimate that "animal rights terrorists commit more than 1,000 crimes annually," but do not substantiate their claim.

Traditionalists who cling to outdated ideologies give visionaries a forum for debate. When Epstein and Brook allege that tax-funded animal studies find cures for AIDS, cancer and other illnesses, one is compelled to ask, "How?" In fact, most advances come from modes that blend in vitro (test tube) technology with human tissues, computer systems, and population studies. Medical breakthroughs without animals include: Isolation of the AIDS virus, cholesterol's link to heart disease, cancer's tie with nutrition and smoking, the stroke connection with hypertension, and the discovery of penicillin, anti-depressants, and AZT for AIDS sufferers.

Pro-vivisectionists believe that animal tests are mandatory. Yet most overlook veteran researchers who have rejected the animal model altogether. "I know of no achievement through vivisection, no scientific discovery, that could not have been obtained without

such barbarism and cruelty. The whole thing is evil," says Charles Mayo, founder of the Mayo Clinic.

In their zeal to define an entire philosophy as maniacal, the AR-haters have missed the point. Violence is violence—whether blood spills from a person, a deer, an otter or a hen. "The end of violence to animals and the end of violence to human beings must, in the final analysis, occur together as one event," writes Dr. Elliot Katz, president of In Defense of Animals (IDA).

We presume that some animals are companions; others are for food, science or clothing. When society catalogs living beings, it discards their suffering. All animals have central nervous systems. All feel pain and know fear. Imagine, George Bernard Shaw wrote, "if a group of beings from another planet were to land on Earth—beings who considered themselves as superior to you—would you concede them the right over you, that you assume over animals?" Probably not.

We live in a world where deer decorate walls, boys beat puppies, slaughterhouse workers mutilate conscious cows, and circus trainers batter wild animals. Some say it's overwhelming. Why bother? Years ago I looked into the eyes of an animal and discovered the place in myself that yearns for comfort, a warm touch, a familiar dwelling. I uncovered a mutual fear of violence and confinement. I found hope in stories of animal bravery and unconditional love.

The AR movement has gained enough momentum to invite outspoken antagonists like Epstein, Brook, and others. Though abolition for animals may not occur in this lifetime, I am proud to be among the pioneers who fight for an animal's right to live uncaged.

