*Nine Out of Ten Ocelots Prefer:*

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

$12.95

VOL. 10, ISSUE 4

SEPT./OCT. 2025


## THE ANIMALS ISSUE

*Not a human being in sight. This month we focus on every other species.*

0 74470 29626 3

# Ask A Manatee

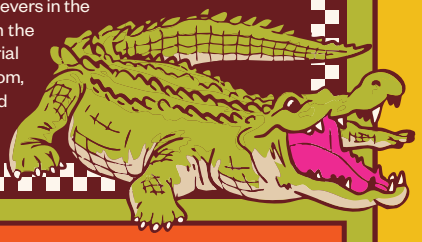
**For this special Animals edition, we revive our acclaimed advice column "Ask a Manatee," in which a local sirenian endeavors to answer the petty queries put to it by elementary schoolers.**

**Q:** Dear Mr. Manatee, who did you vote for in the presidential election? — ***Greta, age 11***

**A:** Greta, your question strikes me as a cruel one. Surely you must know that I am disenfranchised, a creature governed by authorities he has no say in choosing. Is it necessary to rub this in by pretending that it makes a difference whether I support one of your corrupt, useless, ignorant humans or the other in your little popularity contest? I am sure they taught you in school that manatees are deprived of the right to vote because we are thought incapable of higher-order thinking—oh, the irony, for the situation is much the opposite! Not that I would vote if I could. It is a matter of no concern to me who the humans choose to destroy the world. Wreck your society under a red banner or a blue one. I will laugh at your folly either way.

## IF YOU ARE FOND OF ALLIGATORS...

Alligators are not crocodiles. A crocodile will track you for years just to savor the pleasure of eating you. Crocodiles harbor vendettas. They're rough customers. Alligators, on the other hand, will mostly leave you alone if you don't poke them. Alligators are A-okay. And if you like alligators, we can think of no better place to appreciate them than the Great American Alligator Museum here in New Orleans, Louisiana, located at 2051 Magazine Street. (*Current Affairs*, while also located in New Orleans, is inexplicably not on Magazine Street.) We have not been bribed by the curators to say this: we are genuine believers in the Alligator Museum, the only museum in the world dedicated to these noble, mercurial creatures. (There is also a Crocodile Room, if you're into those things, but why would you be?)



CURRENT AFFAIRS (ISSN 2471-2647) is published bi-monthly for $59.99/year by CURRENT AFFAIRS INC., 300 LAFAYETTE STREET, SUITE 210, NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130 Periodicals Postage PAID at NEW ORLEANS, LA and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Current Affairs, 300 Lafayette St., Suite 210, New Orleans, LA 70130 PRINTED IN PENNSYLVANIA BY Sheridan Press.


**This issue was made possible with a grant from the Craigslist Charitable Fund**

craigslist CHARITABLE FUND

## WHY THIS PUBLICATION CARES ABOUT ANIMALS

***A Note From Editor in Chief Nathan J. Robinson***

Welcome to our special Animals edition of *Current Affairs*. In one sense, every issue of *Current Affairs* is an Animals issue, since we are known to have more animal references per page than any other national political magazine. So in a way this could be called the More Animals Than Usual edition. "But why so many? Why now?" you may ask. "And why has *Current Affairs* always featured animals so heavily, anyway?"

Look, we can't deny that pictures of animals sell magazines. Our "Smoking Cat" cover by Aleksandra Waliczewksa has become downright iconic. Would you rather buy a magazine with a dog on it, or a magazine with Joe Biden on it? Even if the contents of the magazine have nothing to do with animals, it makes sound commercial sense to commission as much animal art as possible, and so we do.

But we also love animals in a very deep and sincere sense. There is a serious message underneath even frivolous CA features like "Planet of the Manatees." We think that too often, human beings move through the world oblivious to all the non-human lives being lived around them. The sentience of other creatures simply doesn't register. They are given the moral status of rocks or lumps of wood. They are ignored at best, and exploited or killed at worst.

But animals are alive. They are sentient. They have minds and emotions. They matter. Our magazine is committed to continuously reminding us of this. It is easy, with so many problems afflicting human society (poverty, war, climate catastrophe, patriarchy, racism, etc.) to see animals' concerns as secondary, or to forget them entirely. But they are so numerous, their minds so sophisticated, that to do this is morally indefensible.

*Current Affairs* is proud of its record on animal welfare issues over the past ten years. We've published moving interviews with animal rights activists and powerful articles about the destruction of habitats, the horror of factory farming, and the pragmatic strategies needed to achieve humane conditions for our fellow creatures. The topic remains a neglected one, however. It's hard to get attention for it. That's why we're devoting a full issue to animals. Thanks to a generous grant from the **Craigslist Charitable Fund**, we have been able to engage some of the country's best writers and activists to shift the focus away from people for once. We hope this issue will make you think about some questions you don't usually ask, and even encourage you to join the movement to improve the lives of the animals around us.

One thing this issue proves is that "animal welfare" is not a simple topic. We worried when we started assembling the edition, that there might be too little to say. We deplore factory farming, extinction, exploitation, etc., but how much could we write? Quite a lot, it turns out. In this issue you'll find discussions of rat infestations, the sentience of slugs, the lives of pigeons, the role of meat in our nightmares, the history of socialist animal rights activists, and more. We could have commissioned much, much more, and there will be plenty more on the topic in future editions.

John Sanbonmatsu, author of *The Omnivore's Deception*, says that "the animal economy today is the greatest system of mass violence and injustice in the history of the world." Although I spend more of my own time writing about human genocides, human oppression, and human suffering, I cannot argue with his conclusion. Once we accept the reality of animals' sentience and suffering, and peel back the curtain on our brutal system of mass killing, it is hard to escape the conclusion that what we do to other animals is a moral outrage of the highest order. I hope that even if you are a meat-eater, or someone who finds it difficult to care about animal rights, you will thoughtfully consider the pieces in this issue. *Current Affairs* readers are distinguished by their open-mindedness, moral commitment, and intelligence (yes, we're buttering you up!). It is my hope and expectation that our audience will respond well to this attempt to ensure that the issues of animals do not slip from our attention.

NJR

# EVERY CREATURE IS IMPORTANT

SEAL OF APPROVAL

"Hic phoca huic ephemeridi favet"

## YOU, TOO, ARE AN ANIMAL

Ah, but here is another thing: We are discussing animals in this issue as if they are something different from ourselves, something set apart. But this is misleading. For you, too, are an animal. The creatures of the earth are not some Other. They are our cousins, both near and distant. Many of them look unsettlingly like us, from the right angle. Remember this always, and consider its implications.

Maybe the problem is not how the skunk smells, maybe the problem is that you are not open-minded enough...

**IN 1634, A SKUNK WAS DESCRIBED IN *THE JESUIT RELATIONS*:**

"The other is a low animal, about the size of a little dog or cat. I mention it here, not on account of its excellence, but to make of it a symbol of sin. I have seen three or four of them. It has black fur, quite beautiful and shining; and has upon its back two perfectly white stripes, which join near the neck and tail, making an oval that adds greatly to their grace. The tail is bushy and well furnished with hair, like the tail of a Fox; it carries it curled back like that of a Squirrel. It is more white than black; and, at the first glance, you would say, especially when it walks, that it ought to be called Jupiter's little dog. But it is so stinking and casts so foul an odor, that it is unworthy of being called the dog of Pluto. No sewer ever smelled so bad. I would not have believed it if I had not smelled it myself. Your heart almost fails you when you approach the animal; two have been killed in our court, and several days afterward there was such a dreadful odor throughout our house that we could not endure it. I believe the sin smelled by Saint Catherine de Sienne must have had the same vile odor."

## DO NOT NEGLECT THE SHRIMP

It is easy to believe you care about animals, but to forget to care about the shrimp. Here at *Current Affairs*, we never neglect the shrimp. We encourage you not to do so, either. Set a reminder on your phone if necessary. "The Shrimp," it could say. Every hour on the hour. Then you won't forget.

## CATS LOVE CURRENT AFFAIRS

Cats tell us frequently how much they appreciate this magazine. The support is gratifying, because there are not many things that cats like. They are discerning creatures. They are not known to spend much time reading magazines. So when they meow their approval of *Current Affairs*, we take that as the most gratifying possible compliment. Buy your kitty a subscription today.

"GET ME PICTURES OF ANIMALS!"
— The Editor

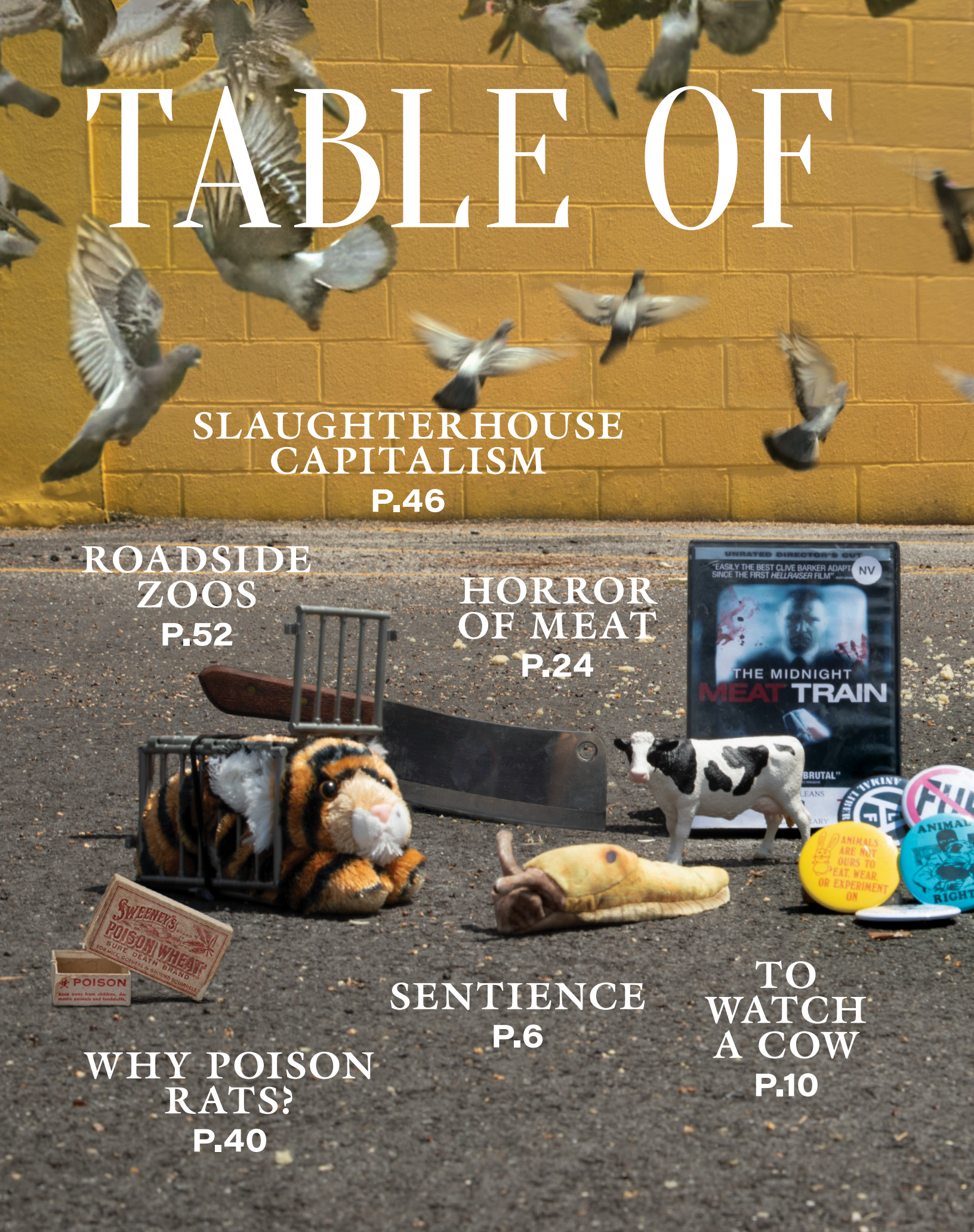
## WHY THE FLAMINGO?

At a recent *Current Affairs* party, a number of readers approached the editor-in-chief and asked a somewhat unusual question: "So, why flamingos?" It is true that there were flamingo stirrers in the cocktails, flamingos printed on the napkins and menus, and that the editor himself was dressed in a giant flamingo costume. But the question nevertheless took us aback, especially since many of those asking it imbued their query with a note of outright hostility. When the editor did not answer immediately, they escalated from a whisper to a scream. "WHY THE FLAMINGO?!" they demanded imperiously, chasing the editor-in-chief round the courtyard until he responded.

To us, it would seem obvious. The flamingo is a creature of great elegance. Nobody who has suddenly beheld a flamboyance of flamingos in the wild has failed to be cheered by its appearance. Would the world be better off without flamingos? Has anyone ever argued this seriously? The question "Why the flamingo?" makes as much sense to us as "Why a sunset?" or "Why the beach?" Those who ask it reveal more about themselves than they do about us. If you are the sort of person who would ask, then perhaps what you want is a different question, namely, "Who am I and why do I think it is questionable to cover things in flamingos?"

# TABLE OF



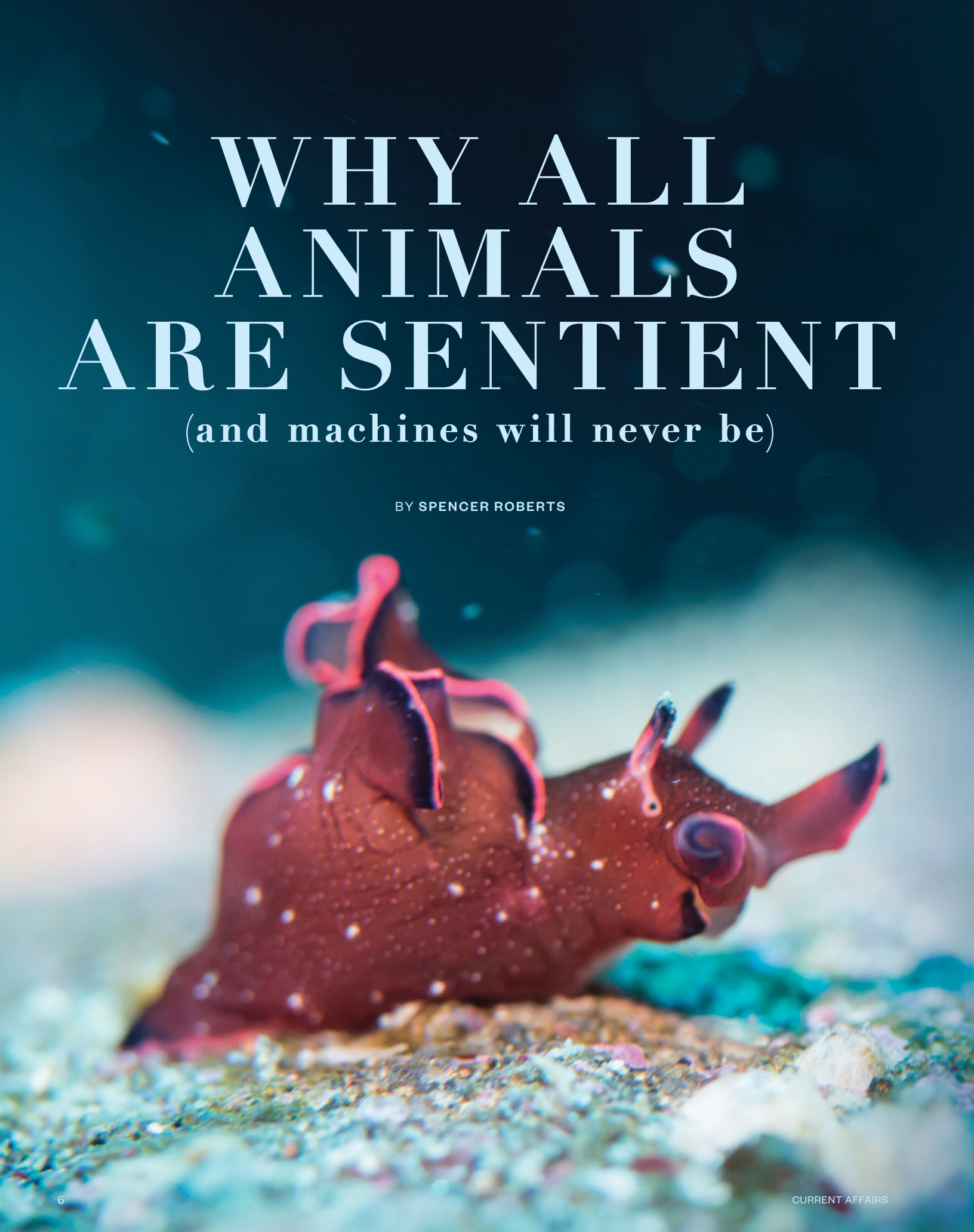


# CONTENTS

# WHY ALL ANIMALS ARE SENTIENT

## (and machines will never be)

BY **SPENCER ROBERTS**



When I was 26, my right first molar fell to pieces. It had been decaying from a cavity hidden between my teeth, and I was a part-time service worker who had not seen a dentist in years. But the United States healthcare system permitted my parents' insurance to cover me for several more months, so in shame, I visited my mother, who brought me to a dentist, both affordable and negligent. He conducted a root canal with insufficient anesthetic. I lay, sentient, as he severed each of the three nerves anchoring my tooth with a drill. It was excruciating.

I thought of *Aplysia*—the giant sea slug genus commonly known as "sea hares," despite being slow. In 1970, neuroscientist Peter Harley pinned over 80 California sea hares (*A. californica*) to dissecting tables and severed the nerve cord to their right pleural ganglion. These methods would lay the groundwork for experiments by associates of Eric Kandel, whose Nobel-winning research described neural memory: the fundamental biomechanics of learning. Vivisecting all these slugs helped achieve major advances in neuroscience, establishing concepts such as habituation and sensitization, despite the clear implication we biologists prefer to gloss over: it had to hurt.

Sentience is ill-defined. Many conflate it with consciousness or self-awareness, but its etymology stems from the Latin verb *sentire*: to feel. Its earliest known use in English dates to the 1600s, in reference to "the power of… sense-perception." The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines sentience as "feeling or sensation as *distinguished* from perception and thought" [emphasis added]. It is one of the five primary human senses, the tactile sense carried by electrical signals throughout the nervous system. Sentience is more than just pain; it is the gratification of an itch and the stimulation of a tickle, the warmth of a caress and the chill of a first kiss. But acute pain is its most lucid and universal expression—the manifestation of a neurological process known as *nociception*: the perception of noxious stimuli.

A great diversity of life forms possess *nociceptors* and other neural machinery associated with nociception, indicating that pain is a fundamental evolutionary adaptation. Over billions of years, the simple nerve nets that animate sponges and jellies branched out into stunning complexity, imparting incredible cognitive capacities, from the escape artistry of the octopus to the spatial memory of the orangutan. These cognitive feats are built from the common heritage of all animal life: the capacity to feel.

It is critical to differentiate concrete concepts like sentience and cognition—the processing of sensation—from abstract ideas, such as consciousness and emotion. Philosophers past have described the benchmark for consciousness as "subjective experience," a standard often interchangeably used for sentience. Yet abstractions like this cannot be empirically substantiated. Objective evidence of subjective experience is a contradiction in terms, an impossible standard that sets animals up to fail. The concept of sentience, however, allows us to acknowledge that other species can suffer, even if we can never know what they think. Consciousness is an endless philosophical question. To evaluate sentience, let us deal in observable phenomena.

Western science has been reluctant to acknowledge the sentience of other animals, just as it has been toward other theories that challenged the myth of human supremacy, such as natural selection or the heliocentric universe. Since antiquity, decorated thinkers have confidently asserted that other animals were mindless and incapable of suffering. This belief has been a fixation of western philosophy, from Aristotle to Descartes, who proclaimed other animals to be soulless "automata" as he cut open their beating hearts.

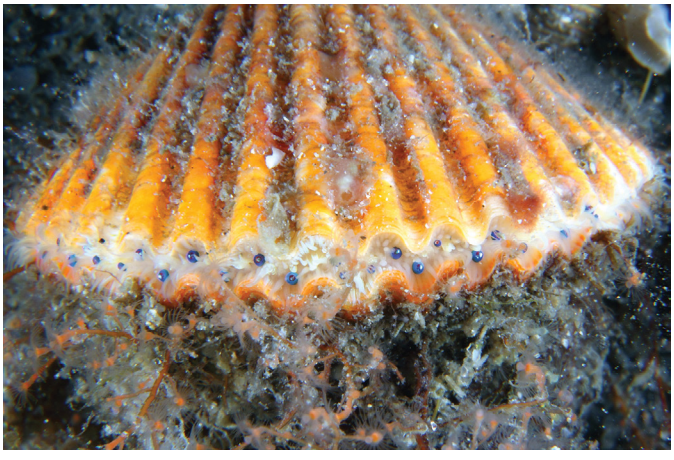
Today, most believe the mammals Descartes mutilated suffered horribly, but similar arguments persist with respect to species such as fishes. In response to objections rising to the popularization of recreational fishing in the 1960s, South African ichthyologist J.L.B. Smith articulated some of the first scholarly arguments against the sentience of fish, reasoning that sea life was "primitive," the same reason he believed Africans felt "comparably less pain than Whites." While researchers have since shown that fishes' brains light up with electrical activity upon exposure to noxious stimuli, after which they breathe heavily, rub their injuries, and seek analgesic, the thrust of Smith's argument remains relevant.

Often in science, the benchmark for sentience is set exceptionally high, moving the goalposts to standards we don't expect as evidence of other sensory systems. For instance, when observing that another animal has functional eyes, few will challenge whether the animal can see. Yet when presented that an animal has nerves, their faculty to feel inspires vigorous debate. Some may concede that animals with nociceptors might feel, yet question, "Can they feel pain?" This is like looking at the rod photoreceptors and asking, "But can they see shades?" This is precisely the purpose of the organ—and we can test whether it functions by observing the animal's reaction to a stimulus. Of course we can never know exactly what they experience, but the presence of functioning receptors is considered sufficient evidence of vision, olfaction, sound reception, and yet we have carved an exemption for sentience. This is not shrewd skepticism. It is cognitive dissonance.

As a result of this motivated mystification of sentience, even far more complex cognitive indicators are more readily accepted. Take mirror self-recognition, in which an animal is shown their reflection, then marked on their face and shown the mirror again, testing whether they gesture or react to the mark. The earliest of these experiments on primates were considered breakthroughs toward establishing evidence of non-human self-consciousness. They were then applied to other species, becoming a sort of cognitive benchmark.

Mirror tests are inherently biased toward visual species with appendages to gesture or facial musculature to convey reactions. Even still, animals from red ants to cleaner wrasses are now considered to have passed, challenging us to examine our default assumption, or null hypothesis, that other animals are unconscious or unfeeling until proven otherwise. Instead, considering that no animal has ever been proven to lack consciousness, evidence is far more robust for a new paradigm: assuming that all other animals are self-aware.

*The scallop has many eyes, which look up close like little blueberries. Photos by Wikimedia Commons, Eric Heupel, Kevin Bryant*



However, our sentience and self-awareness does not make us superior life forms. Often, philosophers have attempted to use sentience to "draw the line" of moral worth on the proverbial tree of life. In 1975, Peter Singer drew it "somewhere between a shrimp and an oyster" in his book *Animal Liberation*, arguing bivalves had no capacity for sentience and cognition.

He wasn't looking closely.

Every oyster is born a planktonic larva, at a metamorphic stage called the *trochophore*. After several weeks, their final larval stage, the *pediveliger*, begins searching for a home, listening for the sound of a reef. Like larval fishes, crustaceans, and corals, these "sonic youth" preferentially settle in healthy habitats. There, the oysters take their final form, living up to decades in aggregations. Oyster colonies exhibit fascinating social behavior, reorganizing in response to changes in light, noise, and water chemistry.

Other bivalves are equally complex. Clams will pump water to disperse their scent when a predator is near. They hide their sensitive mantle when shadows pass above. Mussels can differentiate the scents of predators, burrowing deeper when a lobster approaches and huddling together when they smell a drilling snail. They can also learn from past exposure to parasitic trematodes, intaking less water and forgoing food to avoid infection. Scallops construct a mental representation of their environment from their many eyes, which they use to try to escape dredge nets, but become disoriented in bright lights, like deer. And of course, just like their close gastropod relatives in laboratories, bivalves avoid noxious stimuli.

Still, debate persists over whether bivalves and gastropods

can really feel. Some argue they lack a central nervous system (CNS) and a brain—yet this is disputed by marine biologists and, regardless, can be argued of all invertebrates. The vertebrate CNS includes the spinal cord, which invertebrates of course do not have. If the spinal cord is a requirement for sentience, then a lancelet would pass and an octopus would fail. Furthermore, invertebrate "brains" like that of the octopus are *analogous structures* to ours. We also say the octopus has "arms," but of course we don't assume they function like our own. Both the human and octopus brains are neural processing centers, yet are constructed from entirely different organs in wildly different organizations. Finally, if centralization indicates sentience, octopuses might fail this metric as well, as around two-thirds of their neurons are outside the central brain structure, distributed throughout a brain-like *ganglion* in each appendage.

Of course, an oyster does not bear the cognitive complexity of an octopus, but to point to the octopus' advanced cognition as a justification to ignore that of the oyster is the same logic as using the human intellect to justify exploiting a chicken. At once, the extraordinary nervous system of the octopus has evolved both convergently toward ours, and divergently from molluscan ancestors who share the same fundamental neural organs and mechanics as their fellow invertebrates—just as we do with other mammals, reptiles, and fishes. Sentience is therefore expressed across a great radiation of life with many gradients and intricacies.

This, of course, raises the question of plant sentience. Indisputably, plants react to tissue damage and sometimes tactile stimuli. Certainly animals, with our unique nervous systems, have a distinct ability to feel pain, but could plants possess an analogous sense, using chemical neurotransmitters through vascular tissues instead of electrical signals through nerves? We may never know.

Yet the prospect of plant sentience should not prompt us to reject animal rights. In fact, it compels us to recognize them even more strongly. The number of plants killed annually for human food far outstrips even the trillions of animals, yet more than a third of the caloric yield from those plants and more than three quarters of all agricultural land is used for animal farming. An animal's metabolism can only assimilate a fraction of the energy and nutrients it consumes, thus only 12 percent of the calories embodied globally in animal feed become human food. Therefore, a plant-based food system incurs the killing of far fewer plants and animals, both in farms and in the ecosystems displaced to develop them.

The inner lives of other life forms are unfathomably fascinating. Plants can learn and remember where to find light and nutrients. Fungi can evaluate their surroundings and make decisions on where and how to grow. Even bacteria exhibit intricate social communication. The implications of these realities beckon us not to picture our own thoughts in the mind of a mushroom, but to open our imagination to how other species might perceive the world in ways we cannot conceive.

However, one thing that is definitively not sentient, and never will be, is software. As a programmer, I have built and trained machine learning models. It is accurate to attribute to them a form of "intelligence," but we call it artificial for a reason. What software shares with our biological intelligence is the capability to process logic. In fact, a computer's ability to perform a logical procedure far exceeds our own, both in speed and in scale—and this is precisely because they do not think. Our logical capacity is colored, in some cases inhibited, by our more primary cognitive faculties, by our sentience.

The trendy idea of "sentient AI," associated with the rise of conversational language models, belies a fundamental misunderstanding. First, it conflates sentience and consciousness. A language model returning predictive text, however correct or convincing, does not suggest that it feels pain. An autonomous vehicle would actually be a better candidate for sentience, with tactile sensors transmitting signals to a processing chip to inform navigational decisions. Yet this is far from nociception.

However, recent advances in robotics *have* emulated nociception. For instance, prosthetic prototypes with sensitive thermal sensors can send shocks to the nervous system, mimicking reflexes to prevent burns. Yet this is an augmentation of the user's tactile sense, akin to a hearing aid. Still, some experimental robots have been designed with tactile *memristors* and functions to detect and avoid damage. We could call this a form of artificial nociception, but is it sentience? Pain is more than just a reflex—can we see the signs we observe in other animals in a machine? What would they look like? Would its mechanical arms seize in panic? Would its hydraulic fluid spike with stress hormones? Would its camera sensors well with tears? Would it truly suffer?

The idea of AI sentience remains trapped in the misguided paradigm of evaluating non-human intelligence by its resemblance to human behavior. It is sad that our society is so generous in considering the sentience of machines, yet so skeptical of other creatures. We sympathize with software that prints "I don't want to die," without bothering to learn the languages others use to make the same plea.

All life has value. Even if they aren't sentient, the endangered wildflower and the ancient coastal redwood should not be cut. However, it is logical and noble to extend special protections to animals, whom we know can suffer pain. It is natural to be partial to our fellow humans and to feel an indescribable connection to our favorite animals. But we must acknowledge that there is no objective basis to these preferences. It is equally valid to appreciate and value dogs as it is cats, or for that matter pigs, chickens, anchovies, or oysters. Founding the case for animal rights upon the universal value of all life imparts a more robust epistemology that does not undermine itself by ranking the value of species against one another.

We all know how it feels to be hurt, perhaps even in a way that no one else seems to understand. In these moments, we wish for nothing more than someone to acknowledge our pain. Sentience imparts us visceral, universal signals which we innately recognize in others, but have been conditioned to disbelieve. Other life forms cannot describe their pain to us, yet we can still listen. If there is a line of moral worth to be drawn across our tree of life, it should be below, through the common roots from which we all grow. Our world is so much more complex and wondrous than the myth of human supremacy would have us believe. ⚜

# TO WATCH A *COW*

BY **CIARA MOLONEY**

Andrea Arnold's 2021 film *Cow* is, ostensibly, a documentary about a dairy cow. But it offers an experience unlike any other documentary I have watched. Shot over four years on a dairy farm in Kent, England, its portrayal of a cow's life eschews the reassuring framework of the human perspective. There is no narration, no talking heads, no facts and figures guiding us—yet it doesn't feel like it's just a typical animal documentary that has had those elements subtracted. It feels like a fictional film starring animal actors. It feels like a cinema verité documentary that a cow would make for other cows. The few humans who appear onscreen are insignificant, transient, and above all distant. The cow is our constant. "It's not really a documentary. I don't think it is. I don't know what it is, but it's not a documentary," Arnold said in an interview with *The Playlist*, before admitting, "I don't know why it's not… What is a documentary, maybe?"

Before it can be anything else, film is a sensory experience. Few filmmakers make me feel this as acutely as Andrea Arnold, who renders environments so vividly that I remember them in tastes and textures as much as images, in ambient sounds as much as dialogue. Plants that crack through concrete, potholes big enough that rain turns them into ponds, the tinny sound of a pop song in someone else's headphones. The crunch of leaves and squelch of mud and taste of cotton in the heathery moors of her adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, and the cold, too-wet stickiness of the pork ribs thrown on the ground and scavenged by the hungry children in her Oscar-winning short film *Wasp*.

Arnold's environments are not just urban or rural, but often a third kind of space: not the cleanly partitioned suburbs, but the liminal spaces in which city and country blur together, exposing the falseness of the urban/rural dichotomy. This reflects her own upbringing. Raised by a young single mother in public housing in Kent, her childhood was full of curious juxtapositions of post-industrial decay and pre-agricultural wilderness. She would wander between "estates and chalk pits and deserted old industrial spaces and woods and motorways," she wrote for *The Guardian*. "Out of this grew a deep love of insects and birds and animals and plants. Stray estate dogs, the Traveller ponies chained by the motorway, the fish and frogs in the water-filled bomb site, wild strawberries on the banks of the chalk pits. I can conjure up these places vividly now. The smells and sounds and feels and colors."

Arnold is one of the great chroniclers of working-class woman- and girlhood, like a social-realist counterpoint to Sofia Coppola's gilded cage movies. As Ian Christie writes for *Criterion*, Arnold's films often "center on young women living in housing projects and facing sexually fraught situations." You would expect *Cow* to stand apart from other work in this regard, but it feels deeply embedded in the same themes and ways of seeing. Even its title smacks of a vulgar, English misogyny: in British English, "cow" is a demeaning epithet for a woman who's abrasive, mean, or conceited.

We're introduced to Luma, *Cow*'s titular protagonist, as she gives birth, human hands easing the calf out by the hooves. As the calf lays in the hay, coated in amniotic fluid and blood, Luma carefully, diligently licks her newborn clean. The calf stumbles to their feet and sucks at Luma's teat. And then they are separated: Luma is corralled in one direction, her offspring in another, never to see each other again. The placenta is hanging from Luma's backside, afterbirth still in progress. She cries out—a mooing that doesn't sound intrinsically like distress, but in repetition, feels like a demand to see her baby. She stares down the camera lens with her big, black eyes. Then she is pulled off somewhere else, to be hooked up to a milking machine. A top 40 radio station echoes around her, because to the humans that pick the music, it's just another day at the office.

Arnold and director of photography Magda Kowalczyk shoot *Cow* from Luma's eye level. Like the kid's-level shots in *ET*, it makes the viewer see the world as its characters see it, to identify and empathize with their point of view. Doing this with kids is

one thing—not only has everyone had personal relationships with children, but we've all *been* children—but achieving the same effect with a cow, an animal that most people have probably not even seen up close, is a stunning testament to Roger Ebert's description of cinema as a machine that generates empathy. *Cow* doesn't anthropomorphize Luma: the distinctness of her features, the force of her personality, her rich emotional life, none of this is in contention with her emphatic *cowness*. The film individuates her without the need to make her seem more human. Instead, it reveals that some of the qualities we imagine as uniquely, definitionally human are in cows, too. Her eyes are so unhuman—big and black and shiny—and achingly soulful. "I just wanted to show you her consciousness," Arnold told *Vulture*, "I wanted to show the character and the aliveness of a nonhuman animal. I wanted to see if we could see that."

The cows are constantly being moved from here to there, but we often don't understand why. We're experiencing the cows' perspective, and it's just the push and pull of a force of nature, as far as the cow knows. Snatches of human dialogue throughout are contextless chit-chat, like we're sitting just outside a circle of people who all already know each other. At one point, two farm workers describe Luma's increasing protectiveness, often coming out as

*Cow (2021)*

aggression: "She never used to be… This is her sixth. Last year she put me out of the pen. That wasn't even her calf either. Old age, she's got protective. That's what happens." It's casual, and in some ways, obvious: dairy cows regularly give birth so they can continue to produce milk. (Luma's udders are so swollen and distended with milk that, by the end of the film, she has difficulty walking.) But Luma's separation from her calf was devastating enough before

# Q&A | WHY NOT JUST BAN KILLING ANIMALS?

## DAVID MICHELSON

**SPOKESPERSON, IP28 CAMPAIGN**

**Initiative Petition 28 (IP28) is a ballot initiative for the 2026 Oregon election that proposes to ban the intentional injury, killing, and artificial insemination of all animals statewide, which includes a ban on slaughter, hunting, fishing, and experimentation. IP28 goes far beyond any existing animal welfare policy. *Current Affairs* spoke to David Michelson, a spokesperson for the IP28 campaign, about why they're pushing such a radical initiative.**

**Q: So why this initiative?**

**A:** We believe this initiative will help shift society towards no longer using the killing of animals as a strategy to meet human needs. Given the radical nature of the campaign, we're aware that it is almost certainly not going to pass in 2026. Despite that, we believe getting it on the ballot now will make it more likely to pass in a future election cycle, and that it will help us build the organization we'd need to *keep* getting it on the ballot. Our goal is to be persistent, and we take part of our inspiration from the U.S. Women's Suffrage Movement, which used the same strategy to get the right to vote. In Oregon in particular, women won the right to vote prior to the 19th amendment using the ballot initiative process—but their initiative was only successfully passed on their sixth attempt. Nationwide, they forced the vote 54 times in 30 different states, and ultimately 15 of those initiatives passed. Even though many individual initiatives didn't pass, those votes stimulated widespread public discussion that raised our public consciousness (and in the words of one suffragist, the truths and arguments discussed prior to the elections were "like leaven" and "seeds" that took root and eventually "sprung up everywhere").

**Q: To be clear, this would have the *effect* of banning all animal slaughter, which many people would consider a radical result. But it does so only through a small change to the law, i.e. by saying that animal cruelty laws should be applied consistently and not include exceptions. Is part of the purpose here to show the public how strange it is that we create such broad exceptions to animal cruelty laws?**

**A:** It is definitely our hope that this initiative will draw attention to the vastly different ways we treat companion animals compared to animals currently on farms, in research labs, and in the wild. And you're absolutely correct about how our initiative works. IP28 is quite simple: it removes exemptions from our current animal cruelty laws so that the exact same protections we already have for our companion animals are extended to all animals in the state.

In Oregon, animal abuse is legally defined as the intentional, knowing, and

finding out it was her sixth pregnancy. Five babies had been taken from her before the film started, and she hadn't gotten used to it, hadn't adjusted to a new normal, had just gotten angrier, more protective of calves that aren't even hers.

*Cow* is not a grisly exposé of factory farming or a didactic piece of vegan agitprop. It takes a clear-eyed, observational approach, and that is precisely why it is one of the most harrowing, upsetting films I've ever seen. It presents a reality that we know to be true but which most of us, most of the time, choose not to see. As with so many things, it's easier not to have to think about it.

In his essay "Why Look at Animals?", art critic John Berger describes a shift in how animals are conceptualized in human culture. The mainstream view once saw animals as majestic and mysterious secret keepers: human and animal, both alike and unalike, can observe one another, but only across an impassable abyss. Animals contained an existential duality: "They were subjected *and* worshipped, bred *and* sacrificed." By the 19th century, this shifted in favor of viewing animals as essentially mechanical. A more tender stance towards animals no longer spoke of their unknowable wisdom, but their supposed innocence. This shift in attitudes happened in parallel with a shift in lifestyle, as humans in the city of the Industrial Revolution moved from living with and among animals to living separate from them.

*Cow* feels rooted in this earlier way of understanding animals. We look at Luma and recognize her; she looks back at us. We understand her in many ways, but she is in other ways unknowable. She is one particular cow with a specific experience, and the archetypical cow, standing for a billion others. It is painful to watch her calf be taken from her, and I pour her milk over my breakfast cereal in the morning.

"A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork," Berger writes, "What is significant, and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements are connected by an *and* and not by a *but*." Us "urban strangers" must either learn to understand the *and*, or morally reckon with the contradiction that necessitates a *but*. Luma doesn't have a bad life for a cow: she feeds on grass out in the fields, she mates naturally with a bull in seemingly pleasant circumstances rather than being subjected to artificial insemination, and the farm workers are both warm and professional. She is not abused or hurt. And yet—with zero emotive music cues or leading narration—*Cow* is a heart-wrenching, hard watch. It says, *this is where your dairy comes from*. You don't need prompting to ask yourself, *is it worth it?*

reckless injury of an animal. That definition makes sense, right? Except that we intentionally injure animals all the time when we slaughter them, hunt them, and experiment on them, and yet none of those are classified as animal abuse under the law. The reason is because those activities are written in as exemptions to our animal cruelty laws. We have quite a few exemptions currently in Oregon state law: animals being transported are exempt (so they don't need to be given adequate space for exercise, potable water, protection from the elements, etc). So are animals in rodeos and exhibitions, animals on farms and those sent to slaughter, animals being hunted and fished, and animals being used for research. These exemptions would all be removed if IP28 were to pass.

**Q: If IP28 passed, it would be disruptive in many ways, because so much economic activity is built around the killing of animals. How could we transition away without ruining farmers and food companies?**

A: I think the first step of talking about this transition is to empathize with the needs that people are currently attempting to meet by killing animals. Those who work in animal agriculture are likely trying to meet needs for economic stability, for contributing to their communities, and for sustenance. We want those needs to be met, we just want to propose meeting those needs in a way that also respects the needs of animals (and for us, respect for an animal precludes taking their needs away by killing them). Same with those who hunt and fish; they are likely attempting to meet needs for connection, sustenance, and recreation. All of those needs we share, we just want to make sure animals get the opportunity to meet their needs too—which they don't get to do if they are being slaughtered, hunted, tested on, confined, or otherwise harmed by humans.

So, what would these alternative strategies be? Personally, I'm grateful for groups like the Farm Adaptation Network and the Transfarmation Project, which are two organizations that help farmers transition to plant-based agriculture. Some of the most talked about transitions have been helping turn chicken farms into mushroom farms. Growing these types of organizations would be instrumental in transitioning away from killing animals for food. The other types of critical programs are those that help with job retraining. While some jobs, like working in a slaughterhouse, would obviously go away it is likely that jobs in the plant-based food system such as flour milling and maize processing would increase. There was actually a report by the International Labour Organization claiming to be the first to document how shifting from meat consumption to plant-based foods would create jobs. They were focused on Latin America and the Caribbean specifically, and found that a shift in diet would result in "4.3 million fewer jobs in livestock herding, poultry, dairy, and fishing" but would "create 19 million more full-time equivalent jobs in plant-based agriculture."

To this end, IP28 does create a Humane Transition Fund, which would be overseen by a council made up of representatives from the Department of Agriculture, Department of Fish and Wildlife, representatives from the nine tribal governments in Oregon, veterinary professionals, animal sanctuary workers, and quite a few others. This fund could be used for food assistance (either directly through food and cash benefits or indirectly by providing funds for grocery stores to improve food access), to replace lost income, to help with job retraining, to provide animal care, or to aid in conservation and rewilding efforts.

We're confident that alternative strategies are out there for any human need we can think of. For research, we can use human tissues and cells, organs-on-chips, and computer models. For wildlife protection, we could use the introduction of sterile males or birth control. And if the perfect alternatives aren't available yet, I do believe that necessity breeds invention. If we committed to not killing animals anymore, we would find a way. Our campaign doesn't have a prescribed alternative that we think works best in every situation, but we do think that by recognizing animals as individuals with needs that we are committed to protecting, then we'll be able to find or create alternatives together.


NO PAR
MONDAY 4
TUN
PASSPORT
BAKE
Bean
PS
PIZZA
FOR RENT
JOIN I.C.E.
Liquor
SELL YOUR BLOOD! $ $
FIRE HUMANS HIRE A.I.
BUY GUNS
CIGARETTES
POLICE

# In Defense Of PIGEONS

BY **CAT THOMPSON**

In Hollywood's beloved holiday blockbuster *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*, protagonist Kevin's worst fears come not from his bloodthirsty assailants—the self-proclaimed "Sticky Bandits"—but in the form of a homeless "Pigeon Lady" living in Central Park. As a child watching the film, I thought she seemed intimidating with her cloak of flapping birds, grubby face, and austere expression. However, as the movie unfolds, Kevin gets to know the Pigeon Lady (actual name notwithstanding), discovering a kind, gentle woman scarred by a tragic history of heartbreak and abandonment. Much like her feathered companions, she has faced rejection and chooses to live with them on the fringes of society. She acknowledges the similarity, explaining to Kevin: "Like the birds I care for, people pass me in the street. They see me but try to ignore me. They'd prefer it if I wasn't part of their city."

Touched by Kevin's amity, her bitterness subsides and, in a climatic display, she unleashes her pigeon flock against Kevin's pursuers. Overwhelmed by the winged warriors, the robbers are taken down and, consequently feathered, are arrested. To show his gratitude, Kevin later gifts her one of a pair of ceramic turtle doves, which he's told by the toyshop owner signify everlasting friendship.

Like their cinematic counterparts, the common pigeon—that squat, ash-grey bird with a shimmering neckline and (if you've cared to look closely enough) striking orange eyes, whose ancestry is traced to the cliff-dwelling Rock Dove—is indeed a symbol of fidelity and friendship, owing to its loyal and affectionate nature. Yet, like the Pigeon Lady, it's been cast aside by humans who have revered, bred, and even depended on the bird they once dubbed the "athlete of the sky" for thousands of years. Now, on a daily basis, these gentle birds are kicked at, shot at, poisoned, and kept at arm's length by all manner of insidious spikes and nets.

So what happened to these affectionate, docile birds, which have shown humans such loyalty, tenderness and trust for millennia, now advocated for by a limited few and persecuted by so many?

## RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM

Pigeon symbolism runs deep through human history. The world's oldest domesticated bird frequently appears across religious texts, where doves are famously a motif for peace and purity, idealized for their white feathers. However, doves and pigeons are all part of the same family, known as Columbidae. And as author Andrew D. Blechman describes, the differentiation is all down to "linguistic bias." As he notes in his book, *Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Reviled and Revered Bird*, the word "dove," in 14th century French, translates to "pigeon."

Blechman explains that, although they're essentially the same bird, the more delicate members of the Columbidae family are considered "doves" while the supposedly less graceful members are "pigeons," giving rise to an old adage that "all pigeons are doves but not all doves are pigeons." He gives the example that if a bigger pigeon (i.e. not delicate) is white, it may still be referred to as a "dove." He continues: "Doves have come to mean petite and pure. Colloquial use of the word pigeon, on the other hand, emphasizes the dove's docile nature and places it in a negative light." Phrases like "stool pigeon"—which originates from the practice of tying pigeons to a stool to attract and trap predators—and "pigeonholed" are examples of how the word serves to describe inferiority.

In fact, Charles Darwin was among the first to demonstrate that the distinction between pigeons and doves is merely a biased interpretation of the same

species. To support his argument for the theory of evolution, he selectively bred the birds in his backyard, often noting stark differences, like large fan-tails and feathery feet, all the while acknowledging their shared Rock Dove ancestor. He discussed his observations extensively in his famous 1859 work *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin's fascination led him to join a pigeon fancier club, the Southwark Columbarium Society, in which members collected and bred "fancy" pigeons.

Appearances aside, people have observed remarkable tenderness in pigeons for millennia, regardless of color or size. This trait is especially noticeable in their mating rituals. When a female pigeon wants a male to care for her, and ultimately their children, she places her beak inside his. By graciously accepting this gesture, the male is committing to his paternal responsibility. Blechman describes the sexual act itself as "very gentle and completely consensual," followed by "affectionate cooing and preening of each other's feathers."

It's this exchange of affection and responsibility of successful mating pairs which gives rise to pigeons' role as a symbol for chasteness and purity in many cultures—as well as the idiom "billing and cooing," used to describe couples showing affection (or "PDA" in today's terms).

The birds also share parenting responsibilities, including egg sitting and feeding. And, if this doesn't already present a glowing example of gender equality, both males and females secrete a milk-like substance, produced by prolactin—the hormone behind lactation—in their throats (or crops), which is fed to newborn squabs and is crucial to their development. Pigeons are one of only three birds, including flamingos and penguins, who nurse their young in this way.

It's these qualities that earned the birds reverence in antiquity. Historical records, including on stone tablets in Mesopotamia (the area known as Iran and Iraq today) from 3000 BCE, indicate the birds were sacrificial assets and frequently offered to gods, while also serving as a food staple. In fact, the ubiquity of stone temples meant rock pigeons were right at home, while historic dovecotes—earthen houses for pigeons—date back some 2,000 years in Egypt, suggesting the birds were intentionally domesticated.

Pigeons' fine parenting skills also cast them as symbols of fertility. The Babylonian goddess Ishtar, "Queen of Heaven and Earth and of the Evening Star," was often depicted holding a pigeon or as the winged bird herself. The Phoenecian goddess of love and fertility, Astarte, was also represented as a pigeon, as were the Greek goddess Aphrodite and her Roman counterpart, Venus.

Pigeons also appear in Judeo-Christian narratives, most memorably, perhaps, in the story of Noah's Ark in which a dove is sent to determine whether the floods have subsided. The dove—or white pigeon to today's ornithologists—returns with an olive branch to indicate dry land. This is in contrast to the first attempt by a raven, which does not return.

## WINGED MESSENGERS

As well as their significance as a harbinger of peace, the story of the pigeon's return to the ark would be a mighty narrative coincidence if ancient civilizations had not picked up on the bird's homing abilities.

5,000 years ago in Egypt, similar to Noah's story, their earliest domesticated use is thought to be to warn people the

# Q&A

## HOW TO TEACH ABOUT ANIMAL WELFARE

MONICA CHEN
NEW ROOTS INSTITUTE

**Monica Chen is the executive director of the New Roots Institute, which educates high school and college students on the impacts of factory farming and supports them as they become advocates for a just and sustainable food system.**

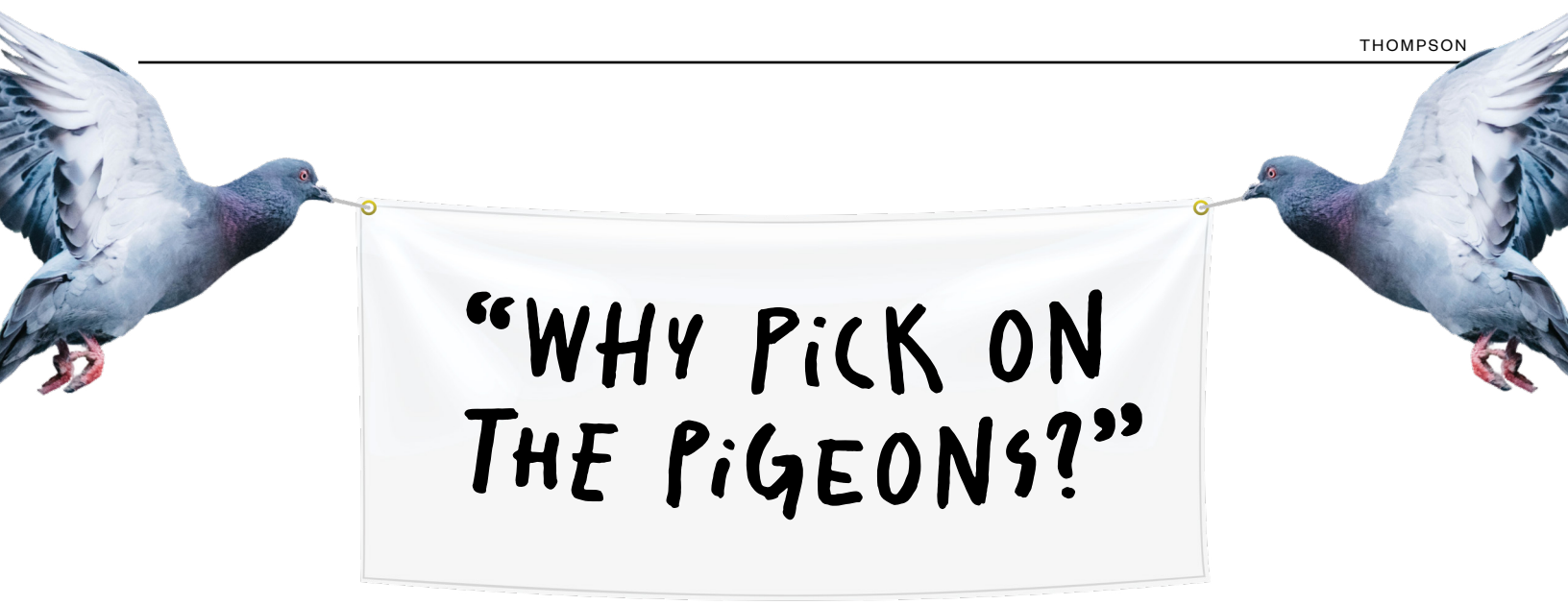
**Q: You're focused on educating young people about factory farming. What have you found out about what works?**

**A:** Effectively meeting students where they are means asking questions, listening, and leading with curiosity rather than judgment. Our fellows inspire their peers to think critically about the connections between industrial animal agriculture and key issues that affect all of us, like climate change, human rights, and public health. When students can explore their own perspectives and connect the topic to issues they already care about, we see deeper engagement and lasting interest.

Humor is essential, and our "Rotten Truth" series is a testament to that! Also, facts alone are not enough. Facts land best when they are clear, credible, and paired with visuals and stories that make them stick.

**Q: Have you learned anything about what does not work?**

**A:** Just talking about the problem is not empowering. Students need to see solutions at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels. Additionally, while young people can be incredibly capable and motivated, we have seen the greatest success when they are supported by older generations who share resources. It is not enough to say "let youth lead, it is all up to you."




Nile was flooded. According to Blechman, if the Nile was flooding, pigeons would be released and fly back home to let residents know. They were also used as messenger birds to announce the ascension of a pharaoh.

In the eighth century BCE, the ancient Greeks used carrier pigeons to deliver the results of the Olympic Games to villagers with a taste for gambling. Their presence at the Olympics lived on until last century when, at the opening ceremony of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, a flock of pigeons (referred to as doves) did not fly away as expected and were incinerated in the game's Olympic cauldron.

In an episode of the British podcast series *The Rest is History*, BBC journalist Gordon Corera refers to Roman scholar Pliny the Elder's writings in his *Naturalis Historia* (Natural History) about the use and value of pigeons in Rome and how, in 50 BCE, a single pair of pigeons were sold for 400 dinari—about twice the annual wage of a Roman soldier. He describes their homing abilities as a "superpower": "So you're starting to see these birds can be incredibly valuable in civilizations where there's a proper understanding of their homing abilities[...] these are creatures which are like a kind of superhero, they live among us and look normal and you don't realize that they have this tremendous power. And, like any kind of superhero story, the science behind it is a bit wobbly."

There are several theories exploring pigeons' mysterious ability to navigate home from unfamiliar pastures—sometimes as far as 1,800 km away. Visual cues, like landmarks and the sun's position, along with smell, are usually considered to be the factors influencing their direction, but scientists also believe the Earth's magnetic field helps a pigeon determine its bearings. This is, in part, due to the discovery of iron particles present in the beak. Another possible explanation is that pigeons create a kind of "sound map," where they are guided by low-frequency sounds generated by the natural landscape. This theory emerged after geophysicist Jonathan Hagstrum became curious as to why 60,000 birds went missing during a long-distance race. His eureka moment arrived when he discovered a supersonic Concorde jet had disrupted their flight path, unleashing a sonic boom and throwing them off course. He explained: "When I realized the birds in that race were on the same flight path as the Concorde, I knew it had to be infrasound."

## PIGEON POWER

Throughout diverse periods of military history, pigeons have repeatedly proven their worth. Julius Caesar's assassin Decimus Brutus and his adopted son and consul Aulus Hirtius are rumored to be the first to implement a pigeon postal system militarily, using the birds to communicate from the city of Mutina during Mark Antony's siege. Some 2,000 years later, homing pigeons were integral to the First and Second World Wars, where several were credited with saving hundreds of lives.

One notable example from WWI is Cher Ami, or "Dear Friend" in French. He was one of 600 Army Signal Corps pigeons deployed in that war, and the one who saved the 77th—or "Lost"—Battalion, which was cut off and trapped behind German lines without other means of communication. If that wasn't bad enough, American bombs began mistakenly dropping on the 77th Battalion. The soldiers' only hope was to send out an undetectable form of communication—a pigeon. Unfortunately the Germans were wise to the pigeon service, and Cher Ami proved a third-time charm after two before him were shot down.

U.S. Army Major Charles Whittlesey attached a note to the bird's leg which read: "We are along the road parallel to 276.4. Our own artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us. For heaven's sake, stop it." Though Cher Ami dodged several bullets, he did not escape fire and a shot through the chest sent him plummeting to the ground. However, by some miracle, he resumed his flight, covering 40 km in just under half an hour. Following the successful delivery of the message, the bombardment ceased, and nearly 200 soldiers returned safely to America.

As for Cher Ami, he was treated by army medics, but lost his right leg and his vision. He became a testament to pigeons' "superhero" qualities, and was awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French government for bravery on the battlefield. General John Pershing famously said of Cher Ami: "There isn't anything the United States can do too much for this bird."

The heroic bird died from his war wounds in July 1919, and his body was preserved. In 2021, on the 100th

anniversary of his display in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, his body underwent DNA testing to resolve an enduring mystery surrounding his sex, which confirmed him male. And, yes, his body is still displayed today should you wish to honor Cher's bravery personally. You're welcome.

## ATHLETES OF THE SKY

Unsurprisingly, pigeons lent themselves to a growing sport in the 1800s. Their renowned athletic and navigational abilities gave rise to pigeon "fanciers," who selectively bred them for both racing and exhibiting. Pigeon racing originated in Belgium—where the world governing body Federation Colombophile Internationale (FCI) is situated today—making its way to the U.S. in the 1860s.

In a typical race the birds, which are identified by a tag around their leg, are trained to return to their loft from a starting point. The starting and finishing times are noted, and their speed calculated by dividing the distance by the duration of the bird's flight. The distances involved vary from 100 up to 1,200 kilometers, known as a "Very Long Distance" race.

Known as "Homers," these pigeons are supposedly the perfect iteration, cross-bred from varieties noted for two key attributes: physical endurance, and the ability to navigate home from great distances. The pigeon's return is based on one or sometimes two factors—food and, if they are in a pair, a reunion with their paramour, in a controversial practice known as "widowing."

While pigeon fanciers and breeders are often considered deeply attentive toward their flocks, it's rarely without an agenda. Separating a sentient being from their loved one so they are forced to fly thousands of kilometers for the sake of "entertainment" is one of several examples of the cruel treatment of the birds—so trusting of humans regardless of the abuse they face, both off and on the streets. As you might expect, some pigeons do not make it home, suspected drowned in the desperate bid to return to their mate.

To outsiders, the sport might seem like a quirky and harmless pastime. But its glamor cloaks a darker side of exploitation, cruelty, and the kind of moral repugnance usually reserved for blood sports like fox hunting. As well as fatal exertion, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has revealed cases of breeders shooting unwanted birds and using abusive training methods, often as part of a multi-million dollar gambling industry, in a 15-month undercover operation in the United States.

PETA's investigators discovered that birds who aren't considered fast enough or useful for breeding are usually killed by suffocation, drowning, neck-breaking, gassing, or decapitation. An article on its website entitled "Pigeons are Not Ours" includes the admission of one "world-renowned racer" who revealed they use just one out of 12 pigeons for breeding, before killing the rest and their offspring.

Perhaps just as grotesque is that the sport's deep competitiveness means pigeons, like human athletes, are not immune to illegal drug enhancement. In 2013, reports of cocaine and painkiller use emerged in six Belgian birds. Investigators discovered traces of acetaminophen in five homing pigeons while cocaine was found in another. The discovery led to fresh calls for a crackdown on the practice, after which tighter rules and more robust enforcement were implemented in Belgium.

Whether this reform was out of concern for the pigeons or for the integrity of the game is uncertain, but let's hope that unlike the birds themselves, the once-celebrated sport continues to decline.

## FALL FROM GRACE

As the popularity of pigeon racing began to dwindle, so too did humanity's long love affair with pigeons. In the mid-20th century, the term "rats of the sky" became a common slur, courtesy of New York City Parks commissioner Thomas Hoving, who used it when falsely linking them with a 1960s meningitis outbreak. The rumor was debunked, but the name remained, cemented in popular culture when it cropped up in Woody Allen's 1980 film *Stardust Memories*. (As if there weren't already enough reasons to dislike *that* guy.)

In 2005, sociologist Colin Jerolmack, author of "How Pigeons Became Rats: The Cultural Spatial Logic of Problem Animals," trawled through 155 years worth of *New York Times* articles to better understand the human-pigeon relationship timeline. He believed Allen's movie proved fatal for pigeons' plummeting reputation. In the early 2000s, under ostensibly socialist mayor Ken Livingstone, London killed off the majority of its famous Trafalgar Square pigeons, starving them by banning people from feeding them and even introducing hawks to kill the pigeons, resulting in the square's pigeon population declining from 4,000 to several hundred.

In an article for *Audubon* magazine, Jerolmack suggested that another explanation for pigeons' swift fall from grace is their tendency to poop in vast quantities. According to the Southern Nevada Health District, an individual pigeon poops around 25 pounds a year—the weight equivalent of around two bowling balls. And since the feces is highly corrosive, over time it can cause structural damage to buildings.

Jerolmack explains that the effect contributes to a widespread belief that the birds are encroaching on our designated city space—places of orderly civilization as opposed to the nonlinear chaos of nature, where pigeons and their poop

supposedly belong. As he puts it: "That doesn't mean there's no nature, but ideally, the city is the place where we invite nature in ways that we control. We cut out little squares in the concrete, and that's where the trees belong. We don't like it when grass and weeds begin to grow through cracks in the sidewalks, because that's nature breaking out of those boundaries that we want to keep it in."

These uniform ideals about who "belongs" and "doesn't belong" apply to birds and humans alike. In cities around the world, property owners often place sharp spikes to keep pigeons away. They do the same thing to poor and homeless people, too, in the form of "hostile architecture": spikes, bolts, and railings, casually woven into the makeup of metropolitan areas to deter weary individuals seeking rest or shelter. This is seen in irregular shaped benches, awning with deliberate gaps in and, more overtly, in boulders under bridges, designed to push society's outliers to its fringes—think back to *Home Alone*'s Pigeon Lady. It's all the same underlying cruelty.

## WHAT'S A BIT OF POOP BETWEEN PALS?

Almost two decades after Jerolmack's paper, a controversial 16-foot pigeon sculpture known as "Dinosaur" occupies Manhattan's High Line Plinth, a dedicated space reserved for contemporary art structures. The creator, artist Ivan Argote, told *Smithsonian Magazine* that pigeons are both "an icon of New York" and "a marginal creature living in dirty corners." The statue's name also points to their ancestry, since birds are considered a surviving descendant of dinosaurs. Argote also said he wanted the piece to evoke "an uncanny feeling of attraction, seduction and fear" among New Yorkers—a statement capturing the extremes of our love-hate relationship with pigeons.

In another gracious acceptance of the supposed city interloper, the London Museum caused controversy when, in 2024, it redesigned its logo as a pigeon complete with a glittery poop splat. Museum director Sharon Ament told the BBC the design celebrated the "gritty" reality of city life. "The pigeon and splat speak to a historic place full of dualities; a place where the grit and the glitter have existed side by side for millennia; an impartial and humble observer of London life."

While it's true pigeon feces can contain a fungus that, if inhaled, could lead to illness for a person with a poor immune system, disease expert Professor Mario Girolami argued the same germs are common in the air, soil, and among other animals. "Why pick on the pigeons?" he asked a *New York Times* reporter.

Pigeon rehabilitator Inese Struple, who began rescuing the birds near her London home during the Covid lockdown, described the very few cases of zoonotic transmission of disease from pigeons to humans as "negligible." She added: "I'm part of a large volunteer network, mainly in the UK, but also internationally. I don't know of a single rehabber who has contracted a disease from handling a pigeon."

Inese is among the minds behind a creative solution for pigeon handlers to avoid their homes and aviaries being blighted by the dreaded droppings: pigeon diapers or "flypers," which have a special pouch to collect them. The concept has spread widely among pigeon rehabilitators, with instructional videos showing how to make and put them on. One winged companion who has no need for such accessories is potty-trained "purse pigeon" Pidge, whose story went viral on TikTok. Brooklynite Abby Jardine adopted her, having found her as an abandoned orphan. Abby describes Pidge as a "blend of a cat and a dog," only "weirder," demonstrating her fondness for a neck tickle from her purse carriage.

## CUSTODIANS COMING TOGETHER

It's the city-slicking bird's tender reliance on humans that has led to a growing network of people, like Inese and Abby, looking out for the so-called pests.

San Francisco-based Palomacy Pigeon and Dove Adoptions is a non-profit organization, which has been rescuing and rehoming pigeons since 2007. It has contributed to a global movement of pigeon rescuers, with a social media satellite group of some 42,000 members.

Pigeon custodians remain on the lookout for birds who find themselves victims of the urban environment. One of the most common issues they fall prey to is "stringfoot," when string—from thread and fishing line to human hair and even dental floss—entangles their feet. If it's not removed, they're at risk of infection and even losing their foot altogether. Stringfoot removal groups have begun springing up across the U.S. and further afield, where volunteers share advice on dealing with the issue. Facebook lists eight formal groups in North America, with several more in the U.K. contributing to the grassroots movement.

Last year, Palomacy member Jennifer Morales came to the aid of a stringfoot victim found hanging upside down from a Los Angeles Sunset Boulevard sign in what was described as an "epic rescue." The pigeon—later named Lotto—had human hair and a fishing line tangled around both his feet, which had caught on a bolt. After a solid four hours of wriggling, the stringy mass stripped the flesh from his legs, scoring into his shin bones. After the fire department and a tree trimming service refused to help, SMART Animal Rescue Team, a division of LA Animal Services, finally came to Lotto's aid, stopping the traffic before reaching him with a cherry-picker.

The rescue organization, Moose's Flock Pigeon and Dove Rescue, which took in Lotto, launched a successful fundraiser to pay for his medication and physical therapy.

Talking about the extraordinary display of generosity, she said: "What impresses me most about pigeons is their resilience, and I think that is why Lotto's story resonated so strongly across the globe. He went from nearly dead to using only one leg to using both legs and thriving. As a non-profit pigeon rescue, I help pigeons every day that really shouldn't be alive, but there they are—badly injured, abused or both—and they are eating and drinking and hanging on until they can get help. And they do know when someone is helping them. They know when they are safe and they know when they are in good hands."

While it's not clear when the practice of de-stringing pigeons came about, the late British author Naomi Lewis is credited for her attention to the effects of human detritus on city wildlife. In the 1990s, Lewis ventured out to spots where pigeons gathered, coaxing affected birds with seed before capturing them and snipping tangled debris from their legs. But unfortunately, she was regarded as an "eccentric," and there were few like her around in the late 20th century, when poison was a legal

and acceptable form of flock control.

In 1972 a toxin—or avicide—known as Avitrol, was approved for use by the Environmental Protection Agency across the U.S. The substance fatally attacks the birds' nervous systems, causing distress and convulsions.

In 2020, a woman named Bonnie Siegfried posted a video of a bird convulsing as she held it in her arms, and which later died. Similar cases followed, with pigeons reported plummeting from trees, distressed, twitching and dying. A necropsy found Avitrol was to blame. The poison has been banned in New York, Colorado, Portland and San Francisco, although the law is not always upheld; in 2012, reports of birds "falling from the skies" in Manhattan sparked suspicions over its prohibited use.

"Netting"—an anti-bird device designed to prevent them gathering in places they're not wanted—might seem a tamer way of deterring pigeons, but the nets are well-documented to cause entrapment and suffocation. Last year, animal advocates spoke out after a number of pigeons were found tangled in netting on scaffolding on some Manhattan apartment buildings. Management said the measure followed a health violation due to "excess bird droppings," feebly suggesting that holes cut to release trapped birds were encouraging more to nest there. Meanwhile, advocates pointed out the netting invariably caused *more* droppings due to all the trapped birds, and it was removed after multiple complaints.

Meanwhile, pigeon shooting as a sport is illegal in much of the Western world (in its early 20th century heyday it transitioned to clay-pigeon shooting surprisingly quickly), but Pennsylvania is still notorious for the controversial pastime in which captive pigeons are shot on release. A bill to prohibit the bloodsport was advanced this spring but tabled due to political and financial arguments. However, advocates remain hopeful it will be reintroduced during the next round of legislation.

While there are at least some of us looking out for wildlife's urban underdogs, pigeons clearly don't enjoy the status they once held. Perhaps there will come a day when, especially with people like Jenna, Ines, and Abby filling a much-needed PR position—not to mention the rise of Tik Tok "pigeon propaganda"—people and pigeons can live contentedly side-by-side.

Just the other day, I stopped for an orange juice at a park kiosk. There, at the only available table, was a pigeon innocently hopping about with just one foot—I'm assuming the other fell prey to a tangle of human-derived detritus.

I sat marveling at the bird's incredible resilience, wishing I had some pastry crumbs to afford them a moment of tasty respite. I sat for a while observing this pigeon until a staff member came and shooed them away. Obviously, I understood that she, like most of society, thought of the bird as a pest, shedding apparent contaminants around a place serving food. But it was a park and the pigeon, with its iridescent neck and varying grades of charcoal plumage, was causing me no bother. Happily, I saw them again when I revisited some days later, scampering about with a (two-footed) friend. I realized, with content, this must be their home—a place they gather with their flock and where, hopefully, some diners might spare them a few breadcrumbs.

Showing care to others—regardless of color, shape or species—is not weird or eccentric, it's what makes us human. And it's high time we afford the birds who've never stopped trusting in us, despite facing decades of persecution, at least a crumb of compassion or two. ✣

# Q&A

## WHY SHRIMP?

## ANDRÉS JIMÉNEZ ZORRILLA

**FOUNDER, SHRIMP WELFARE PROJECT**

**Andrés Jiménez Zorrilla of the Shrimp Welfare Project argues that when we think about animal cruelty, we need to think about shrimp. "Shrimp?!" you may ask. Yes, shrimp. Let's let him make the case. We asked Andrés to explain as succinctly as possible why he thinks we need to expand our perspective, looking not just at pigs, cows, and chickens, but at these humble crustaceans.**

**Q: What's the one-sentence case for caring about shrimp?**

**A:** Shrimps make up the largest population of farmed animals, they feel pain, their suffering is widespread yet preventable, and small changes can improve billions of lives each year.

**Q: Alright, let's break that down a bit.**

**A:** First, roughly half a trillion farmed shrimps are killed annually, making them the majority of farmed animals alive at any given time. Second, research shows shrimps are sentient. They exhibit behaviors like tending to injuries, responding to pain relief, and displaying signs of anxiety. Third, industry practices often involve severe suffering, such as eyestalk ablation (removing or crushing the eyes of female shrimps to force reproduction) Finally, despite this immense scale of suffering, there's little attention on shrimp welfare. Shrimp Welfare Project is the only nonprofit solely focused

on improving the lives of farmed shrimps. We work with producers, suppliers, and retailers to promote higher-welfare practices, and our methods are cost-effective. For every $1 donated, approximately 1,500 shrimps are helped annually.


SOCIETY
for the
APPRECIATION
of
UNPOPULAR
and
DISLIKED
ANIMALS
Beauty is skin-deep!
They have virtues!
Your disgust is irrational.
What did they ever do to you?

# ABSOLUTELY ASTONISHING ANIMAL FACTS! OH MY!

WOWZA! GOLLY! NO WAY!

BY GRADY MARTIN

This issue is about the well-being of animals. Animals aren't here just to impress us. They don't deserve justice just because they're cool. But: they sure are cool! And perhaps by remembering how fascinating, complex, and weird the world of other animals is, we will remind ourselve of all that we lose when we destroy them.

## Dogs deliberate democratically.

There is a species of wild dog in Africa called, fittingly enough, the "African wild dog." Research by scientists affiliated with Brown University found that African wild dogs vote by sneezing to decide when to hunt. But it's not a perfect democracy. When popular dogs initiate a rally, they need about three sneezes to begin a hunt. Less popular dogs need 10 sneezes. Sneezes aside, researchers noted that the dogs live in a "despotically driven social system." Rough.

## Armadillos have built-in pool floaties.

When armadillos cross a small body of water (like a creek or small river), they simply hold their breath and walk along the riverbed—they're too dense to swim across. But when they need to navigate a large body of water (like a river or large creek) they can fill their stomachs with air to make themselves more buoyant! Yet another reason why armadillos should be invited to your next pool party.

## Cows have best friends!

Research affiliated with the University of Northampton has attempted to prove what those of us familiar with these gentle beasts already know: cows have friends and are comforted by their presence. Scientists watched cows to determine their friend groups, then separated pairs of cows from the herd. Cows who were separated with their friends were much less stressed than cows separated with a random partner.

## Goats have regional accents!

A 2012 study by professors at Queen Mary Unversity of London found that when baby goats form social groups, their bleats begin to sound similar. In contrast, when they're raised apart, their bleats become more differentiated. This means that goats have, in practice, regional accents. Scientists have also found regional accents among bats, whales, and yes, even people.

## Squirrels can survive a fall from any height.

Squirrels are a cute, fluffy mess in a small package. But all that fluff means that when falling, squirrels generate enough air resistance that their terminal velocity is less than 25 miles an hour. A fall of that speed isn't fast enough to injure a squirrel, meaning that they can survive any fall. It's not quite flying, but it's close enough.

## This skincare routine will save your relationship!

According to a study published in June, whales use kelp to help their friends exfoliate. Scientists off the coast of the Pacific Northwest saw orcas using kelp to clean themselves and their pod-mates. The whales bite off sections of kelp and roll the stems between their bodies, which researchers hypothesize helps the whales remove dead skin. Aside from a fun anecdote, this is a remarkable scientific discovery; this is the first time marine mammals have been seen making and using tools in the way primates do.

HOW?! NEVER! JESUS! IT CAN'T BE! BUT HOW!?

## Otters cuddle while they sleep.

When otters go to bed, they form "rafts" by getting close and holding hands, so that they don't drift apart in the sea. This is a useful survival mechanism—aside from making sure they aren't separated from their friends, it helps them keep warm in cold waters. It also creates adorable viral videos of otters holding hands. Relationship goals.

## Cockatoo tutors.

No animals are unaffected by the anthropocene. But some are teaching each other how to navigate the human world. In an incredible example of animal culture, cockatoos are teaching each other how to open trash cans. The birds show each other how to open bins and get food, and their students go on to teach other cockatoos.

## Giraffes have few neck bones.

A giraffe's neck can be eight feet long and weigh 600 pounds. And yet, they only have seven vertebrae, the same number of neck bones as people! Even more impressive is that these seven bones take considerable abuse. Male giraffes love necking (not like that); they smash their necks against each other to assert dominance.

## Cross-species seasickness.

Humans aren't the only creatures to get seasick. Seasickness is caused by a mismatch between what your eyes see—a fixed horizon—and what your inner ear feels—the rocking of the ocean. Other animals whose inner ears help with balance are thus also susceptible to seasickness. Scientists have performed experiments on horses, sheep, dogs, and cats. It seems cruel since we already knew seasickness exists.

## Hermit crab housing inequality.

Hermit crabs have a very sophisticated process for exchanging shells. They operate using "custody chains": One crab abandons its shell and a smaller one moves in, a smaller crab takes its shell and so-on, often for three or four crabs at a time. But there is some inequality in how shells were distributed: one study found that the heaviest and largest shells were largely confined to a small crab elite—just 1 percent of the crabs controlled 3 percent of the total "shell weight," while the majority lived in somewhat undersized shells. But crabs are practically living in a socialist utopia compared to humans—half of the global wealth in human society is owned by less than a hundred people. In other words, scientists didn't find "Crab Bezos;" just a few petite bourgeois Mr. Krabses.

## Gorillas sing special "food songs"!

Food-related noises have been documented in other primates, like bonobos and orangutans, but they were only recently discovered in gorillas. According to *New Scientist*, a German primatologist, Eva Leuf, observed gorillas in the jungles of the Congo in 2016 and documented that, while enjoying a meal, they would make "a series of short, differently pitched notes that sounds a little like someone humming a random melody." Leuf noted that "They don't sing the same song over and over. It seems like they are composing their little food songs."

## Queen parrotfish protect themselves with a giant bubble while sleeping!

Blowing a bubble to use as a force field sounds like something that a Pokémon would do. But parrotfish really do this in order to protect themselves from parasites, specifically a species of isopod that sucks blood from their eyes. The way parrotfish produce this bubble is a bit grosser than you may imagine, though. The bubble is not made of air, but mucus. Before settling down for the night, parrotfish spend up to an hour working on it.


HOUSTON

# the horror of meat

BY JON GREENAWAY & ALEX SKOPIC

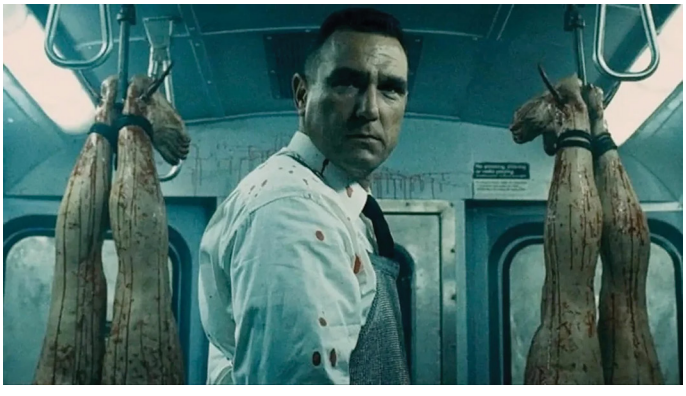
***A WARNING TO UNWARY TRAVELERS:*** *THIS ARTICLE INCLUDES GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF (FICTIONAL) MURDERS, ALONG WITH SPOILERS FOR ALL THE FILMS, SHOWS, AND BOOKS IT DISCUSSES.*

One of the most valuable and engaging things about horror fiction is the way it allegorizes and gives voice to our collective fears and anxieties. Look at the horror stories of a given historical moment, and you can see a metaphoric record of a society's hidden fears, the ones that can't be openly acknowledged. In *Dracula*, we see the dread engendered by a decaying British empire, fearful of the outsider immigrant who moves to London to buy up British property. More contemporary examples can be seen in some of the biggest horror franchises of the past two decades. The subprime mortgage crisis of 2008 was also the year that horror gave expression to our collective fears around property and home ownership with the release of the first in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, which featured a young couple moving into their first home and finding it a site of demonic possession. Another example: the violence and surveillance of the "War on Terror" found expression in the neo-noir of the *Saw* franchise, which emerged in 2004 with its obsessions with surveillance and torture as a punishment for perceived moral failing. What we fear, what we're made to feel revulsion for, is not simply a natural or instinctive response. Rather, it is a political question, and our own feelings of fear and horror are in many ways reflective of a cultural politics that we normally take for granted.

One persistent and underappreciated part of American culture that is rife with grotesque violence and pain is one of capitalism's greatest horrors: the industrial farming system. Every year, billions of thinking, feeling animals are killed in American slaughterhouses. Beneath their bland appearance, meat factories are institutions of death on a colossal scale. Billions of creatures are snuffed out every year in brutal and extreme ways. Without spending too much time on the grisly details, there is a simple reason that these places don't have windows. Horror, with its ability to capitalize on the unspoken, the horrific and the violent which is all too often repressed in cultural discourse, can have a powerful role to play in bringing the violence of our treatment of fellow animals to light and forcing us to confront it. Here, let's examine a few notable films, TV series, and novels, and see what they can tell us about the nightmare lurking in all of our grocery stores—the nightmare of meat.

## *THE MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN (2008)*

*The Midnight Meat Train* is not a subtle film. Adapted from the Clive Barker short story of the same name, it follows a photographer named Leon Kaufman (Bradley Cooper) who becomes obsessed with a mysterious man dressed as a butcher (Vinnie Jones) who he sees skulking around the New York City subway system at night. Soon he learns the hideous truth: that the man, known only as Mahogany, is responsible for a wave of disappearances that has struck the city. He's been killing people with a meat hammer, night after night, then butchering and dressing their corpses just as he would a cow or pig. Then he hangs them from meat hooks in a subway car and delivers them through abandoned tunnels miles underground, where they're ultimately eaten by ancient reptilian creatures. He is, in effect, the lizard-men's wholesale supplier.



*Vinnie Jones as Mahogany in The Midnight Meat Train (2008)*

Barker's plot is straightforward enough. It's really just another example of the "serial killer on the loose" genre that's been a staple of horror cinema since Alfred Hitchcock's 1927 silent film *The Lodger*. What sets *The Midnight Meat Train* apart from a hundred other slasher movies, though, is the way it fixates on butchery and meat production as a motif. In both Barker's original story and the film adaptation, the aesthetic presentation is deliberately excessive.

The prose version exults in its descriptions of gore and mutilation, as if trying to nauseate the reader:

> *The meat of her back had been entirely cleft open from neck to buttock and the muscle had been peeled back to expose the glistening vertebrae. It was the final triumph of the Butcher's craft. Here they hung, these shaved, bled, slit slabs of humanity, opened up like fish, and ripe for devouring.*

Likewise, in the film, director Ryuhei Kitamura cranks the gore dial up to 11 and beyond. In one memorable scene, Mahogany sneaks up behind his latest victim as the man stands talking with another subway passenger, and delivers a mighty smash of the meat hammer to the back of his head. We see a CGI eyeball pop out of his skull and shoot toward the screen, striking the camera lens with a dull *splat*. Then a second victim tries to run, only to slip on her compatriot's rubbery eyeball, fall, and get decapitated.

In a different director's hands, this could be so over-the-top it becomes comedic, and there is an element of dark, *grand guignol* humor here. But although the film shows copious violence and bloodshed, the carnage is also largely dispassionate. Where *Friday the 13th*'s Jason Voorhees kills for revenge or *A Nightmare on Elm Street*'s Freddy Krueger kills out of sadism, Mahogany is a cold professional. He doesn't care who he grabs or how they die; all that matters is that his "customers" in the tunnels are fed and satiated. It's the disconnect between the extreme violence itself and the lack of emotion in Jones' performance that makes him uncanny. Even the environment of the subway cars is cold, all halogen blues and stainless-steel greys—a sterile space. At its core, this isn't a story about *people* at all. It's about an industrial process that renders people into food.

The concept of a person becoming meat has always been one people find viscerally disturbing. It's the subject of children's stories across a dozen cultures. When the giant chases Jack down the beanstalk, he wants to "have his bones to grind my bread." Ditto the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood, or the devouring *rakshasa* of Hindu mythology. But why should humans find being eaten uniquely horrifying, as opposed to just being stabbed or bashed against a rock? We're dead in any case, but being consumed has an undeniable particularity to it. In her book *The Eye of the Crocodile*, ecological philosopher Val Plumwood offers a possible answer. She describes a harrowing experience where she was almost eaten by a crocodile in rural Australia, and the reflections it prompted:

> *For a modern human being from the first, or over-privileged world, the humbling experience of becoming food for another animal is now utterly foreign, almost unthinkable. And our dominant story, which holds that humans are different from and higher than other creatures, are made out of mind-stuff, has encouraged us to eliminate from our lives any animals that are disagreeable, inconvenient or dangerous to humans. This means, especially, animals that can prey on humans. In the absence of a more rounded form of the predation experience, we come to see predation as something we do to others, the inferior ones, but which is never done to us. We are victors and never victims, experiencing triumph but never tragedy, our true identity as minds, not as bodies.*

This cultural assumption that humans are innately distinct from, and above, other animals is deeply ingrained over generations, in both religious and secular narratives. That's why *The Midnight Meat Train*'s blood-soaked excess is so effective. It breaks through that wall of ideology with the bluntness of a literal hammer, reminding us that we are indeed flesh, the same as any other creature. To *memento mori*, it adds *memento carnem*.

There's a precedent here from the history of horror and science fiction. Over the years, plenty of literary scholars have pointed out that H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* functions as a metaphor for British imperialism. With his giant mechanized Martians and their heat rays, Wells showed the British public what it would be like to be invaded and colonized by foreigners with vastly superior firepower. For his part, Clive Barker has written online that "being a vegetarian has lost me more friends than being a gay man," and it seems clear that his chosen diet is an influence on his art, just as his sexuality shows up in the BDSM-inspired imagery of films like *Hellraiser*. With *The Midnight Meat Train*, Barker and Kitamura do for industrial slaughter and meatpacking what Wells did for empire.

For most of its runtime, the film places us in the animal's-eye view, haplessly watching as our fellow creatures are gutted and rendered into sides of meat hanging from hooks. It's only at the very end, when we meet the malignant reptilians hiding in the shadows, that we meet ourselves: the consumers whose hunger makes the carnage happen. The film poses a simple, yet ghastly question: how would it be if another creature treated us the way we treat animals? And if anything, it understates its case. Compared to the vast hangar-like charnel houses operated by Hormel and Tyson Foods in the real world, Mahogany's subway operation is small and quaint. If that knowledge is enough to put us off our movie-theater hot dogs, we only have ourselves to blame.

## THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE (1974)

Tobe Hooper's 1974 film, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, is regularly thought of as one of the most violent horror films of all time. Made on a paltry budget of less than $140,000, the film has become the blueprint for decades of slashers that followed it. It follows five teenagers in rural Texas, concerned that someone is digging up the bodies of the dead and desecrating their corpses. After picking up a giggling hitchhiker and encountering a gas station with no gas, the teenagers come across a farmstead, not too far from the old abattoir which still seems to supply some modicum of employment. At this old farmhouse, decorated with animal bones, the teenagers come across Leatherface, a former slaughterhouse worker who wields a chainsaw and meathook to genuinely skin-crawling impact. The film's low budget means much of the worst violence is only suggested or shown off screen, but the production design makes use of real life animal corpses and blood as a means of keeping the costs down. Filmed in the heat of a Texas summer, the cast and crew spoke regularly about the sheer stench they had to work within: "Aside from being gruesome," remembers Leatherface actor Gunnar Hansen, "the set also stank. In that heat, the bones and hides and animal parts were letting off a rich mix of fumes."

Marilyn Burns, who plays legendary "final girl" Sally, has similar dark memories of the production: "I remember just being tied up," she says, "being screamed at, having the smell of headcheese[…] and the room itself, the chicken, all the other decaying

meat, the decaying set, the decaying crew." As Mark Steven details in his essay on the film, "Between takes, the cast and crew would flee the set, even if only for the shortest reprieve, to seek fresh air or to vomit."

The film reveals that Leatherface and his family were once slaughterhouse workers, who, over time, became desensitized to violence by their work. "My family has always been in meat," as one famous line from the film runs. The film understands that Leatherface and the rest of the cannibal family don't see a big jump from working in a slaughterhouse, tearing apart the flesh of cattle, to murdering humans.

*The climactic dinner scene from The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974)*

The film was remarkably prescient in many ways. Research shows that actual slaughterhouse workers are psychologically traumatized by the work; there's also the exploitation of child labor, and a wide range of horrifying injuries. OSHA data from as far as back 2018 shows an average of two amputations a week for employees of American meat plants—numbers which are almost certain to rise as DOGE-era cuts and deregulation continue to bite. If the owners don't care about animal life, they don't care about human life much more; it's all a process of converting flesh to profit.

The film also shows what happens when a meatpacker or slaughterhouse abruptly leaves town, leaving everyone without jobs. Pioneering horror film critic Robin Wood wrote at the time that Leatherface and his family were a kind of degraded proletariat, struggling to survive in the backwash of deindustrialization. The stagflation of the 1970s that formed the context of the film's production shows what is by now a familiar story. Entire families and communities that exist at the whim of one company, left to scramble for whatever they can find. The corollary of deindustrialization is desperation. It's notable that Leatherface and his family don't seem to *enjoy* the violence they inflict. As the old man of the family puts it, "I just can't take no pleasure in killing. There's just some things you gotta do."

## HANNIBAL (2013)

Where *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* envelops its viewers (and its cast) in a squalid world of rot, heat, stench, and animal bones, NBC's 2013 TV series *Hannibal* inhabits a polar opposite aesthetic world. The show is producer Bryan Fuller's take on Dr. Hannibal Lecter, now portrayed by Mads Mikkelsen instead of the iconic Sir Anthony Hopkins. Formally, it's a crime drama, with Lecter—who hasn't yet been caught—helping detective Will Graham and the FBI catch other, lesser serial killers. And paradoxically given its subject matter, it's a thing of beauty. From the rich colors and lighting of the sets, to the exquisitely-tailored costumes, to the classical music and opera that pervades the soundtrack, every detail is calculated and artful. Unlike with most crime and horror shows, it's as much a sensory experience as a narrative one; you could watch some episodes on mute, and still appreciate them. Nowhere more so than in the frequent cooking scenes.

Most episodes of *Hannibal* contain at least one scene of the not-so-good Dr. Lecter preparing a meal for someone, whether it's a "protein scramble" for breakfast or an elaborate roast for a dinner party. Sometimes the meal consists of human flesh, with Lecter taking a voyeuristic pleasure in watching his guests commit cannibalism unawares. Sometimes it's animal meat, used as a metaphor for human murder. (Of a rabbit: "he should have hopped faster.") Sometimes it's left unclear, with the narrative tension being whether it's one or the other. But in every case, the most disturbing thing in *Hannibal* is that *the food looks good*, even after you know what Lecter has been putting in it. The show had a "food stylist," Janice Poon, on staff to design all the dishes, together with consultancy work from celebrity chef José Andrés. The result is a jarring dissonance. We are watching a man murder and eat other human beings, but with the visual language that's usually used to show Gordon Ramsay making a beef Wellington for Christmas dinner.

These visual choices break down the age-old cultural assumption that benevolence is necessarily aesthetically beautiful, and conversely, that evil is necessarily aesthetically ugly. In reality, no such correlation exists—and beyond that, the aesthetic markers associated with beauty and "high" culture are often inextricably bound up in cruelty. Unlike the *Texas Chainsaw* family, Hannibal is not just a cannibal, but a gourmet. Like *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman, he's an example of what *Blood Knife* magazine editor Colin Broadmoor calls the "psychopathic aesthete":

> *He is a "sophisticated European" (the truest arbiters of taste for many Americans) and "classy." Hannibal is "refined." Unlike with Patrick Bateman, the creators never question Hannibal's tastes, but the character exhibits the same sense of aesthetic superiority and self-satisfaction. The difference is, in Hannibal, the audience is expected to at least somewhat buy into this idea of Hannibal's superiority. When Hannibal murders someone because they violated one of his aesthetic principles (perhaps by being rude or unkempt), the audience accepts that as an explanation in a way that they would not if he listened to Huey Lewis and Phil Collins. This is because the things that Hannibal finds aesthetically pleasing, like rare wines, classical music, and opera, are signifiers of cultural capital in our own society.*

Indeed, the cruelty and the aestheticism are often one and the same, as seen when Lecter serves foie gras. In this case it's definitely goose-derived, but as viewers we're meant to see it as simultaneously attractive and repulsive, in the same way as the human lungs that were sauteed in wine in a previous episode. Again, the (ultimately illusory) distinction between human and animal is dissolved. The person who lost the lungs suffered horribly, and so

*Dr. Lecter serves some suspicious-looking filets. (Hannibal, 2013)*

did the goose who was force-fed until its liver swelled. But instead of observing this common pain and concluding that eating either being—human or avian—is appalling, Lecter has observed it and concluded that eating both is acceptable, because he values aesthetics more than empathy. It's a calculation, the same as the one that says a calf and its mother's suffering is worthwhile if a rare veal steak is the result. To any non-vegetarian viewer, the show poses a sinister question: if you find that steak seductive, are you sure you *wouldn't* eat a human under the right circumstances?

This imagery is also loaded with real-world political significance. In his landmark essay "On Social Sadism", the Marxist science fiction and horror writer China Miéville argues that the delight the rich take in their luxuries is often directly linked to the suffering of the poor; as a key example, he points to the "homeless" themed costume parties that law firms specializing in foreclosure held during the 2010 financial crisis. In these moments, "Class spite, always present, stops half-heartedly disguising itself with bowdlerising condescension." But we can apply this logic of "social sadism" to the killing and consumption of animals, too.

As an objective matter, foie gras—or veal, or caviar, or any other elite delicacy—doesn't taste any better than, say, a nice fried eggplant. There's no particular reason it should be these foods that our society, class society, designates as the fare of the rich and refined. No reason, that is, except for cruelty. Caviar is rare, true, but it also inflicts unusual pain—"Workers often cut female sturgeons open and remove their eggs from their ovaries while they're still alive," notes PETA. Same with veal, and with artificially fattened goose liver, and with the *ortolans*—small songbirds—that are sometimes consumed whole in France. (See Troy Vettese's article in this issue for more on that.)

The cachet these culinary commodities hold is inseparable from the fact that a high cost in pain is needed to acquire them. In this way, Hannibal Lecter's delight in his human meat is only an exaggeration of a real phenomenon. Every chef cooking lamb chops tonight is a mini-Lecter, and so are the diners dropping hundreds of dollars per plate. By the same token, if we were actually going to have a food system free of cruelty, it would mean no longer treating a food's aesthetic qualities as a legitimate reason for it to exist or be produced. The demand and desire for things like veal would simply have to be suppressed, just as a cannibal's desire for human flesh is now. And like with Clive Barker's vegetarianism, it's notable that Bryan Fuller is a pescatarian who has made TV ads for PETA, designed and shot to look like they came straight from the show. All of this isn't even subtext; it's just *text*.

## *UNDER THE SKIN (2000) AND TENDER IS THE FLESH (2017)*

It isn't just film and television horror media that can function as an allegory of the violence of industrial meat production. Horror novels, too, have explored this relationship to powerful effect. Take Michel Faber's 2000 novel *Under the Skin*. Its narrative follows an alien from another world who has assumed human form as she drives around the countryside of Scotland picking up hitchhikers. The alien creature, who goes by the name Isserley, initially approaches her work with some degree of professional pride. The people abducted are taken back to a central base of operations, drugged, fattened up and shipped off the planet back to another world where human meat, which the novel calls *voddissin*, is considered an expensive delicacy.

There are echoes here of Damon Knight's famous 1950s sci-fi story "To Serve Man," which was later turned into an even more famous episode of *The Twilight Zone*. However, as the novel goes on, Isserley cannot help but begin to recognize the commonalities between herself and the humans she abducts. At one point an imprisoned man, who is being fattened up in one of the pens that Isserley's victims are kept in, writes the word "mercy" on the ground—forcing her to pretend not to speak English so that she, and the other alien creatures working in this grisly abattoir, can keep themselves in a state of deliberate ignorance, unable to admit that humans are just as intellectually sophisticated as they are. At another point she demands to see what happens during "processing." She's left terrified and revolted as she watches a man be castrated and have his tongue ripped out.

The entire arc of the novel is the slow dawning realization that Isserley comes to: despite using humans for food, she feels a great affinity for them, recognizing them as sentient creatures, uncomfortably close to herself. Despite all the attempts to maintain her ignorance, the more time she spends with humans the more she comes to see herself in them, preferring at the close of the novel her own self-annihilation than continuing to brutalize other living creatures.

Agustina Bazterrica's enormously popular *Tender is the Flesh* (2017) is another novel that allegorizes the meat industry. *Tender is the Flesh* is a dystopian vision of the future. After a virus infects every animal so that their flesh is fatal to humans, the world is forced to embrace veganism or cannibalism. Given the economic incentives at play, cannibalism is soon industrialized and adopted on a mass scale. Humans raised for consumption are known as "head" and their meat is marketed as "special meat."

The novel follows Marcos, a vegan who works in a slaughterhouse to support his family. Estranged from his wife and emotionally traumatized from the death of his son, he starts sleeping with a woman who has been bred for consumption. He names her Jasmine, and though the novel heavily implies she cannot consent, she becomes pregnant. The true impact of the novel is expertly delayed until its very final pages, in which Marcos is revealed to have used Jasmine only to replace his own dead son with a new living child, as a way of reconciling with his wife, Cecelia. After the baby is born, Marcos takes Jasmine to the barn, readying her for slaughter.

Ultimately, Bazzterica's novel sees the meat industry as capitalism in microcosm, in which every human emotion and interaction requires the consumption of the other. In this it shares something with Marxist-feminist writer Nancy Fraser's critique of capitalism:

*"Capitalism" refers not to a type of economy but to a type of society: one that authorizes an officially designated economy to pile up monetized value for investors and owners, while devouring the non-economized wealth of everyone else. Serving that wealth on a platter to the corporate classes, this society invites them to make a meal of our creative capacities and of the earth that sustains us—with no obligation to replenish what they consume or repair what they damage. And that is a recipe for trouble.*

For Fraser, capitalism is predicated upon endless consumption, a system under which every single scrap of life must be fed into its maw. And as Bazzterica's novel suggests, when we're happy to see this kind of violence inflicted on animals, we'll take to inflicting it on our fellow human beings with a grim, all-encompassing enthusiasm.

The brutal truth of the industrial meat system is that many of us would simply rather not know about what goes on behind the closed doors of slaughterhouses across the country. Yet, as horror has proven over the past centuries, it remains an extremely powerful way of bringing to the surface what is forced to the margins or left unspoken in society. This is profoundly true with our current food production system. Yes, proponents of the current system might argue that food is plentiful and cheap, but the current system depends upon violence on an almost unimaginable scale. Politicians are trying to repress the knowledge of all the cruelty and horror in our capitalist food system, even banning lab-grown meat and criminalizing whistleblowers from factory farms. But the more you repress something, the more it comes back in strange forms through our cultural nightmares. ✣

# Q&A

## WHAT'S INSIDE THE "LITTLE RED BARNS"?

## WILL POTTER

**INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST**

**Investigative journalist Will Potter is the author of *Little Red Barns: Hiding the Truth, from Farm to Fable* (City Lights), which illuminates the "frightening truth about animal agriculture's role in accelerating climate collapse" and "shows how the authoritarian measures being taken to maintain control over this key aspect of the global food supply chain are directly linked to the proliferation and empowerment of far-right militias."**

**Q: What aspects of our food system are kept hidden from public view?**

A: Factory farming is dependent on secrecy. This is how 99 percent of animal products reach American consumers—nearly 10 billion animals raised for food in the United States every year. Over the last 100 years, consumers have grown increasingly removed from farms and food. When we need something, we just go to the grocery store. Most people are unaware of the radical changes in the food system, and have never witnessed the standard industry practices of factory farms: animals crammed by the tens of thousands into windowless sheds, mutilated without pain relief, or slaughtered at breakneck line speeds. But it's not just animal suffering that's concealed. The exploitation of workers—often immigrants and people of color in dangerous, low-paying jobs, and an increasing number of children—and the environmental destruction tied to factory farming are equally obscured. In other words, what's hidden is the true cost of cheap meat.

**Q: How are they kept hidden?**

A: This system is deliberately hidden from consumers through industry collaboration with government and counterterrorism agencies. Big Ag has pushed through "Ag-Gag" censorship laws that criminalize photography, journalism, and whistleblowing on farms and slaughterhouses. These laws were in direct response to a wave of undercover investigations and groundbreaking journalism that exposed animal cruelty violations, like workers beating and sexually abusing animals, and also routine factory farm practices. Corporations have worked closely with the FBI and politicians to brand those who document factory farms as "terrorists" in order to shoot the messenger, and avoid responsibility. Now these laws have spread globally, and international counterterrorism agencies have branded factory farm investigators as terrorists as well. What I realized in my research for *Little Red Barns,* though, is that there are even more powerful forces at play to hide factory farms from public view. We are raised on a romantic narrative of farming—from Old MacDonald to picture books—that is reinforced throughout our lives in advertising campaigns. This sanitized image of red barns, happy cows, and family farmers masks the industrial reality, and the decline of the small farm.

**Q: What are the ties between factory farming and fascism?**

A: In *Little Red Barns* I found a direct connection: the FBI was repeatedly warned by the Justice Department, Congress, and others that its relentless focus on animal activists as "terrorists" was allowing the rise of far right violence. These warnings were ignored, culminating in January 6 and a proliferation of white supremacist and fascist groups. More broadly, though, I argue that the tactics that factory farms have used to silence dissent, criminalize journalism, and marginalize their opposition as "terrorists" have become a new playbook, globally, for repressing social movements. Big Ag's efforts to shut down nonviolent activists and journalists have been foundational to the authoritarianism we're witnessing today. Beyond these direct relationships, though, I've also come to see factory farms and fascism linked in deeper ways. At their core, both require the normalization of mass violence, extreme concentration of power, and silencing of dissent through surveillance and repression. All the while, fascists promise a return to a mythological past—embodied in the idyllic image of the little red barn.

# HANDS-OFF DOG OWNERS!

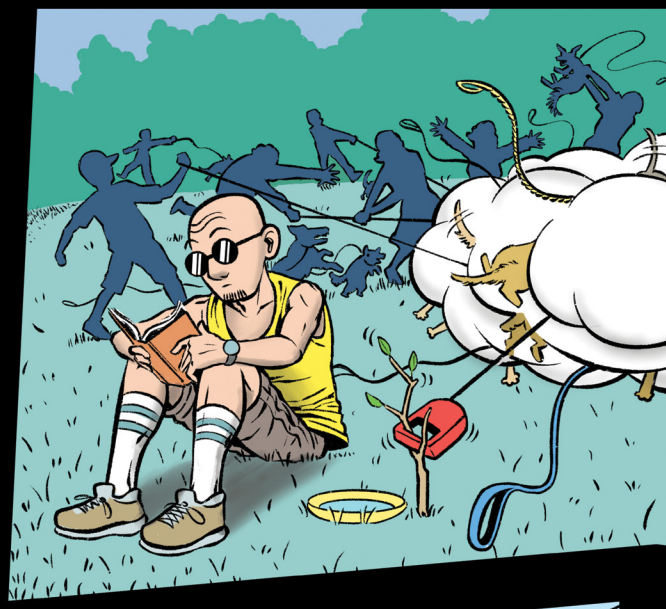
WRITTEN BY:
EVAN ALLGOOD

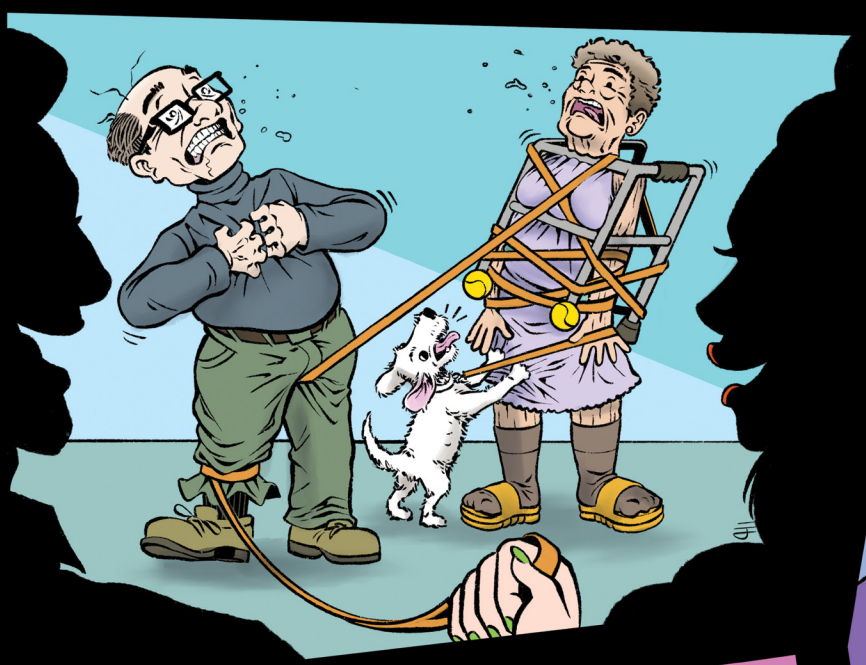
ART BY:
J. LONGO

MATURE M

BLOOD AND GORE; FLAGRANT ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR; INBREEDING; POSSIBLY DALMATIONS

THEIR DOG. YOUR PROBLEM.





# A CRITIQUE OF CONSERVATION

BY **MICHAEL BURROWS**

Last May, a jaw-dropping act of cruelty took place in Maine's Muscongus Bay, a popular tourist area. Three coyotes were killed and strung from a buoy, their gruesome and pointless deaths treated as a simple Coast Guard maintenance issue. Nobody broke any laws (it is perfectly legal to shoot a coyote and leave her to rot), so nobody was held accountable. The same year, the Animal Legal Defense Fund ranked Maine third best in the country in animal protection laws.

As advocates celebrate rising public awareness of animal suffering, wild animals—non-domesticated animals that live in nature and depend on themselves to survive—are rarely part of the conversation. But they should not be ignored. Our ideology and laws dictate the terms of their existence, and the interests that oversee their homes cause immense suffering. Even though most of our lives do not intersect with those of wild animals, we have a moral and practical interest in letting them live out their lives without interference.

A large part of animal advocacy centers around animals raised for human consumption. This focus persists as the U.S. continues to implement practices considered barbaric elsewhere, like in Europe, where hens are allotted more space, cattle cannot be kept inside year-round, and other animal welfare laws provide somewhat greater protections. Pets like dogs and cats also receive a good deal of public attention, often depending upon political convenience—like the time then-Governor Kristi Noem bragged about shooting her own puppy, or when Dr. Fauci was linked to Tunisian science labs that allegedly experiment on beagles. Wild animals that end up in zoos or sanctuaries occasionally capture public interest for brief periods, but the interest is often fleeting. (Even Moo Deng, the baby hippopotamus who skyrocketed to internet fame, is unlikely to keep drawing crowds once she reaches full size.) In my personal political experience with "animal lovers," however, ranging from vegans (who at roughly one percent of the American population are generally considered hard-core activists) to pet-lovers (often the more accessible type), I rarely encounter another advocate who thinks much about wild animals.

This is indefensible. Wild animals deserve our attention and respect, for the same reasons that we should care about any creature: they are sentient, with recognizable social behaviors and emotions, and just like humans their lives have intrinsic value. But wild animals are also unique, simply by virtue of existing outside of the sphere of human stewardship. They live their lives mostly out of our sight, and we have no hands-on role in their breeding or care. Still, our current system of land management treats wild animals as simply another variable in our nation's supply-and-demand graph, to be kept at optimal levels for our purposes. The truth is, we don't have that right, and time and time again, our attempts at interference have only caused more damage. A different path forward is not only possible, but in light of the damage we have caused to the biosphere on our current path, absolutely necessary.

Despite their independence, or maybe because of it, we project an important cultural role onto wild animals. They loom large in our history and storytelling, and provide reference points in human interpretations of who we are. In this sense, these creatures may be more important to us than we are to them. When it comes to domesticated species, scientists often speculate if dogs would struggle to survive in a world without humans, while ethicists debate whether it's *really* wrong to kill a cow if we're the reason they're bred in the first place. As fraught as these debates may be, it is much harder to imagine any way modern industrial society has benefited wild creatures.

Yet the assumption that wild animals somehow benefit from human oversight underpins the way most wild lands are managed in the United States. At two billion-plus acres, our country is quite large, and just three percent of that land is considered "urban"—a statistic that might lead you to imagine vast swaths of untouched wilderness spanning between the coasts. In reality, most of the remaining acreage is made up of cropland and grassland pastures, followed by privately-owned forests, all of which humans preside over, and little of which provides uninterrupted habitat for wild

animals. Only 13 percent of the entire country's landmass is formally protected in any manner. But protected doesn't mean untouched: hunting is permitted in 436 of the 573 total National Wildlife Refuges. Instead of protection as such, the prevailing model of conservation presumes that our intervention is *necessary* for the wellbeing of wild animals, which for some reason, simply cannot manage on their own.

The importance of human intervention and oversight is articulated as the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation (NAM), which assumes that hunters—those who derive personal benefit from killing the animals living in wild lands—are best suited to making decisions about how those wild lands are maintained. The model promotes seven basic principles, all of which assume that wildlife is only useful as a resource and ignore the possibility that wild lives might have any interests of their own. For example: *wildlife is allocated according to democratic rule of law*; meaning it's a commodity that should be allocated among humans, with no consideration for *what* or *who* is being allocated. *Every person has an equal opportunity under the law to participate in hunting and fishing*; because killing animals is our American right. And *scientific management is the best means for wildlife management*; so long as that scientific management is devoted to maintaining optimal population levels of species desirable to hunters, fishers, and trappers.

The NAM has been embraced by most state and federal agencies charged with the responsibility of protecting wildlife, meaning that those who are interested in killing certain animals for economic benefit or recreation are paradoxically granted the responsibility for their well-being.

The idea of hunters as the original and most essential conservationists appears endlessly as a way of justifying our approach to managing public lands, and should be thought of as the central piece of propaganda that holds up American wildlife management. Federal, state and nonprofit groups confidently repeat Theodore Roosevelt's assertion that wild animals can only exist when "sportsmen" preserve them. "In a civilized and cultivated country, wild animals only continue to exist at all when preserved by sportsmen," reads the official U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service website, quoting Roosevelt. Of course, this pointed use of the word "civilized" is stained with the blood of millions of murdered Native Americans—who for centuries on the same land followed a more

# Q&A | LIBERATING THE MINK | THE NORTH AMERICAN ANIMAL LIBERATION PRESS OFFICE

**The North American Animal Liberation Press Office communicates on behalf of underground activists who perform animal rescue operations. In the last few years, there have been a number of actions to liberate mink from mink farms, which have resulted in tens of thousands of mink being set free. The NAALPO answered questions on behalf of the mink liberators.**

**Q: Tell us about mink and the fur trade. Why have mink farms been singled out by those who want to liberate animals?**

A: From killing more than 5 million defenseless fur-bearing animals per year, to "only" 783,000 last year, fur profiteers are under severe pressure to cease their morally-defunct trade. Because it is so vulnerable, the industry is being selectively and heavily targeted by organizations such as Coalition to Abolish the Fur Trade (CAFT).

Mink on fur farms suffer from the moment they are born until the moment they die. They spend their entire lives trapped in tiny wire cages, crammed by the thousands into squalid sheds, unable to take more than a few steps in any direction. As wild animals, they are deprived of every natural act that is important to them—running, digging, making nests, finding mates, and for the semi-aquatic mink, swimming and diving. They never see direct sunlight, or feel the earth beneath their feet. In the anguish and frustration of extreme confinement, they self-mutilate, frantically pace, gnaw on cage bars, endlessly repeat stereotypic behaviors, and cannibalize cagemates. In the United States, not a single federal law exists to protect animals on fur farms.

**Q: What has been done to liberate the mink? What do you hope to accomplish by freeing them?**

A: Dozens of fur farms have been directly attacked by underground activists, who down fences and then open cages to free the captive mink, often thousands at a time. The economic damage to a targeted farm often results in it going out of business. The number of active mink farms in the U.S. has declined from several hundred as recently as 10 years ago, to fewer than 100 today. This effective attack on the supply-side of the fur industry, coupled with attacks on the demand-side like campaigns waged by CAFT resulting in more than a dozen designers and retailers denouncing fur, have the capability to end this cruel trade in fur.

**Q: The argument is always made that these animals cannot survive on their own and these actions do not truly liberate them. How do you respond?**

A: Claims that captive mink are domesticated and cannot survive in the wild are pure industry propaganda. American mink are native to much of the U.S., and have been shown in numerous scientific articles to be perfectly capable of surviving in the wild. As the Animal Liberation Front explains, "Mink are in fact only a few generations removed from their wild cousins and have not yet had their wild instincts bred out. The 'Mink Rehabilitation Project' led by convicted A.L.F. liberator Rod Coronado proved this a decade ago. Mink legally purchased from a fur farm were released into the wild and shown through observation to retain natural survival instincts and thrive in the wild after a lifetime in a cage."

reciprocal and coexistent relationship with the natural world, and who tended to see themselves explicitly as caretakers of the land for future generations. Still, Roosevelt's backwards logic, enshrined in the NAM, guides wildlife management in the United States to this day. Its goal is to ensure that there is a harvestable surplus of "game" species—that is, the animals that are desirable to hunters, such as white-tailed deer.

The NAM is a natural extension of our concept of land ownership. Capitalist land markets make it very difficult for land to not be put to some sort of economic use, like natural resource extraction, agriculture, or housing. Our broader understanding of protected wild areas is filtered through this worldview, which attempts to identify "ecosystem services" provided by the land such as timber or carbon sequestration, and their corresponding dollar values. The value of animals that are hunted for sport fits neatly into this framework, realized through hunting licenses and other recreational spending.

Following this line of reasoning, concepts like maintaining a sustainable population of particular types of animals might be deemed important—so long as doing so encourages people to spend money. Wild land is only allowed to exist if it can be shown to pay for itself, even if the creatures who depend on it do not follow the same economic logic. If the economic benefit is deemed insufficient, then human interests may decide it's time to put the land to a more profitable use.

People have used this perverse logic to argue that trophy hunting actually *helps* animals, because it incentivizes humans to leave wild land undeveloped. Why else, this argument implies, should we leave a lion's habitat alone, if not for the purpose of entering it and killing him? What value could a giraffe possibly have, if not as a gruesome wall plaque? (This argument certainly would not convince the animals being hunted, who probably value their own lives far more than the obscure notion of a population target.)

The NAM asserts that the main function of wild lands is the harvesting of wild animals from them. It centers the role of hunters, fishers, and trappers in governing our relationship to nature, under the assumption that they know best how to steward the natural world in an economically productive way. The evidence for this assumption is extremely narrow: hunters do deserve some credit for preserving and producing surplus populations of the animals they like to hunt, but show little regard for any others.

The laws put into place by hunters and their allies govern most human relations to wild animals. Control and domination permeate this relationship, reflecting the roots of conservation in white supremacy and the prejudicial arrogance that prioritizes one group over others. Supported by pseudoscientific reasoning that does not account for any costs to non-human animals, and backed by mainstream nonprofits with near-universal buy-in, hunters and their allies have designed a system that delivers countless variations of mass slaughter. In all instances, human arrogance and ignorance toward other species is on full display, with those species paying the price. Despite being increasingly out of step with the wider view of a public that is less supportive of hunting, feels more positively toward large carnivores like wolves and coyotes, and is more likely to interact with wildlife through watching than hunting, this system mostly stays out of the public eye, and garners very little attention or criticism.

Where I live in Maine, coyotes seem the biggest victims of this worldview. Maine taxpayers have spent over $50,000 annually to kill coyotes since 2011, and they are the only animal explicitly excluded from the state's wanton waste law (this means that unlike the other animals that can be legally hunted, it is legal to shoot a coyote and leave her to rot). Their year-round hunting remains unchallenged under the auspices of maintaining a sustainable deer population (for hunters to kill), as well as protecting domesticated animals used in animal agriculture (for humans to eat, and which coyotes rarely kill). In defiance of evidence that coyote hunting is worsening the problems of predation, state wildlife officials even advocate for trapping coyotes where guns are not allowed. But research shows that by shattering pack structures, the population of coyotes actually *increases*, as do attacks on livestock.

Polarizing battles over wildlife management are also playing out in Colorado. Most recently, a 2023 ballot measure to ban the hunting and trapping of mountain lions lost by about 300,000 votes, or 10 percent of votes cast. Mountain lion hunting typically involves using hunting dogs to chase the cats up a tree or against a rockface, where they are shot at close range. Advocates for the organized killing of these animals celebrated the result as a win for science-based wildlife management, despite the broken social structure again leading to more livestock predation and more human-wildlife conflicts.

Colorado's bungled grey wolf introduction may have contributed to the failure to ban mountain lion hunting. The proposition to relocate wolves from Oregon to Colorado narrowly passed in 2020, and was justified by the fact that they used to live there. Many worried that the reintroduction might be bad for animals raised for food, or for companion animals, and few efforts were made to prepare the public for the interactions that would result from wolf reintroduction. Since then, wolf after wolf has been trapped, relocated, and killed, and many have recognized the forced relocation to have been a death sentence for the pack.

The Colorado project was inspired by what was widely considered a successful wolf reintroduction in Yellowstone, which ran from 1995 to 1996. Author and park ranger Rick Mcintyre's masterful documentation in his series on *The Alpha Wolves of Yellowstone* follows the repopulation of the park. The project likely required inflicting considerable suffering onto the wolves themselves, who were suddenly forced to survive in a new ecosystem with artificial boundaries, outside of which they could be targeted by eager hunters. Nearly a century after their extermination by U.S. wildlife management authorities in 1926, Yellowstone is now considered one of the best places in the world to view wolves. Yet the ethics of forcibly removing wolf packs from their indigenous homes, and their subsequent relocation to an unfamiliar ecology, was not and is not broadly discussed within the conservation community. Certainly, no efforts were made at the time to assess whether doing so was a desire of the wolves—who, of course, could not be asked whether they wished to be moved from Canada to Wyoming—or indeed in the better interests of other animals that had come to fill their ecological niche after their decades-long absence.

The potential for unnecessary suffering aside, the wolf reintroduction has long been given credit for saving Yellowstone from the scourge of the elk population that exploded after U.S. authorities eradicated wolves the first time around. Contemporary evidence

challenges this conclusion, which should raise questions about whether inflicting plausible suffering on wolves in the name of scientific wildlife management is necessary or useful.

The government is not done with organized killing of wild animals. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plans to launch a new, decades-long "removal" of barred owls. The barred owl's presence in North America predates that of humans, and they are considered native to North America. However, they tend to do better than other kinds of owls in lands that have been impacted by human activity (thinning old growth forests and increased wildfires have decimated the preferred habitat for the spotted owl, which this plan purports to save). The effort is budgeted to cost around a quarter of a billion dollars, and is unlikely to make any meaningful difference in the overall population of the barred owl, despite leading to the death of hundreds of thousands of individual birds, through no fault of their own: the bird's population growth is already outpacing the "best case scenario" of the slaughter. (Notably, this plan is now in doubt due to Trump administration budget cuts).

Such descriptions could go on endlessly. Conservation and wildlife management is a waste of time and money for most of the human population, and a parade of horrors for the wild animals living under our control. We tend to describe these animals in terms of species and populations, but scientific investigation has made clear to us that they are individuals with families and communities who experience life through a range of recognizable emotions. Instead of respecting these lives—or even just ignoring them—we marginalize, torture, and exterminate them.

The prevailing model of conservation has failed all but a few. In alignment with our broader economic and political system, its disregard for nonhuman lives, for less privileged human populations, and for future generations has brought about a mass extinction event that threatens all life on Earth. But there is an alternative: outside of mainstream conservation and wildlife management, emerging paradigms challenge mainstream conservation and try to correct for its failures. Alternatives tend to arise from a simple intuition that is absent from mainstream conservation: that wild animals are not populations to be managed for our benefit, but are individuals who value their own lives. These individuals have more of a claim to life and to freedom from harm than humans have claim to kill them.

"Just preservation" stands out as the framework most aligned with the egalitarian worldview cultivated by left politics. This model emphasizes respect and dignity for other species and attention to the interrelationships between them, rather than the modes through which humans might profit from them. Just preservation advocates for ethical impartiality between species, such that we do not treat species on the basis of any positive preference or negative prejudice. It proposes a multispecies society with equitable distribution of resources and an acknowledgement of responsibilities to other species, as well as explicit consideration for the future of all species.

The principles of just preservation are compatible with socialist thought, and have been strengthened by scientific investigation, moral and philosophical inquiry, and a rational analysis of the failures of traditional conservation. In practice, just preservation would involve explicitly weighing the interests of current human, future human, and non-anthropocentric interests against one another when considering how to "use" nature. People representing these interests would make their case in front of a public trustee (plausibly a reformed version of our currently existing, hunter-dominated state wildlife and natural resource committees), and the trustee would make allocations based upon those resources.

Just preservation offers an ethical framework for reinventing our relationship to wild animals, but the traditional approach to conservation remains mostly unchallenged in policy spheres. Even without taking the well-being of wild animals into account, this status quo represents a failure of representative governance. Most of us who engage with wildlife do so through nonviolent methods like hiking, bird watching, or sight seeing (activities with about twice as many participants in 2016 and 2022 compared to hunters, fishers, and trappers). Because they see wild lands as their personal hunting grounds, hunters and their allies claim to have a monopoly on decision-making—even as more and more of us would like to see wild lands and wild lives treated better.

This improvement in popular attitudes is cause for optimism, but without democratic control of institutions it is not sufficient for change—or else healthcare, military actions, taxation, gun laws, and many other areas of governance would function much differently. Even as the public becomes more sympathetic toward nonhuman animals, this sympathy often appears less as a social movement and more like a constellation of isolated individuals and nonprofits: all acting in often admirable but disconnected ways, without pursuing any coherent agenda.

The absence of a meaningful social movement to reform conservation is what motivated the founding of Wildlife for All, a national campaign which aims to drive state-level reforms in wildlife management. The group's communications director, Mandy Culbertson, believes that many violent and undemocratic aspects of conservation persist because people just don't know about them: "There is a general belief that society has moved past it—they don't know about the specifics of it, they think that things like trapping happened on the frontier in the 1800s. They don't know that there are powerful, entrenched interests that keep it active," she says.

These interests, and the functionaries that represent them, are not generally partisan—following the North American Model is more or less a qualification for working in the field—but the topic has become deeply polarizing. State wildlife commissioners showing any resistance to the most extreme demands of hunters become the target of harassment and lawsuits, as seen recently in Washington and Colorado, where state wildlife officials have recently been driven to resign after opposing hunting interests in their respective states.

Wildlife for All emphasizes that states are the most practical way to take on traditional interests in conservation and wildlife management because of the large amount of wild land owned directly by states, and because their jurisdiction over much federally-owned land. States are also easier to effect change within, and a few engaged advocates have a much greater capacity to influence policy than they might on the federal stage. More transparency in state governance will expose and undermine the entrenched interests that cause the most harm to wild lives, and public engagement on these issues will facilitate the expression of a public will with less violent tendencies toward the natural world. Their democratic approach to wildlife management is accompanied by a respect for

# Q&A

## ON BEING A LAWYER FOR CHICKENS

ALENE ANELLO
ANIMAL LAW ATTORNEY

**Alene Anello is an animal law attorney and the founder of Legal Impact for Chickens. A graduate of Harvard Law School, she previously worked at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, The Good Food Institute, and the Animal Legal Defense Fund.**

**Q: Tell us about chickens. Why are they your focus?**

A: Chickens are sensitive, intelligent animals. They develop friendships with one another, and can even befriend people. These birds feel pain just like a cat or a dog. In sanctuaries or in the wild, chickens reveal their curious, unique, strong, and loving personalities. They develop social hierarchies and befriend both people and one another. They recognize patterns and do other complex cognitive tasks. And they deserve to be treated with kindness.

Yet in modern America, chickens suffer greatly—and in huge numbers. U.S. companies raise and slaughter nine billion chickens each year. That's more than the entire population of humans on the planet. Because chickens are so small, it takes about 200 chickens to produce the amount of meat that comes from one cow. Partly as a result of this, nine out of every ten land animals farmed nationwide is a chicken. And 99.9% of U.S. chickens live on factory farms.

Chickens raised on factory farms for meat (typically referred to as broiler chickens) live crammed into dark, crowded sheds. The industry denies these birds natural light and fresh air. It keeps them in feces-infested spaces that make fertile breeding grounds for disease. Though chickens' natural lifespan can be several years, companies breed "broiler" chickens to reach full size when they are still very young. Companies then slaughter these birds at just weeks old. Most chicken meat sold in U.S. grocery stores shows evidence of white striping disease, a condition in which chickens grow so fast that their muscles die from lack of oxygen.

Birds used for eggs face a different kind of nightmare. The U.S. egg industry kills infant male chicks as soon as they hatch—since male birds can't lay eggs. The egg industry then forces seventy percent of hens to live in tiny wire cages so small that the birds can't even spread their wings throughout their entire lives. The egg industry also intentionally slices off the tips of female chicks' sensitive beaks with a hot blade, ostensibly to prevent the trapped birds from pecking one another.

At slaughter, companies dump fully conscious birds onto a conveyor belt, hoist them upside-down by their legs while they struggle, drag them through an electric water bath, and cut their necks with a blade. Companies do this all at a speed of up to 175 birds per minute (a rate USDA has promised to accelerate yet further, along with cutting inspection requirements). After passing chickens by the blade, companies dunk the birds' bodies in scalding water to remove their feathers. And Legal Impact for Chickens is suing one chicken meat company, Case Farms, for boiling birds alive by dunking them into this scalding tank without killing them first.

Meanwhile, many birds never even make it to slaughter. The dirty, crowded conditions that chickens are raised in and their poor overall health have recently led to a raging bird flu epidemic among U.S. poultry stock. Avian influenza itself causes enormous suffering.

Yet the government currently pays little attention to chickens' welfare. For instance, USDA currently interprets the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act, the federal government's most well-known farmed animal protection law, to exclude poultry.

Chickens deserve better.

**Q: A lot of people choose to try to create legislative policy changes, or engage in direct action, or build media orgs, or pressure companies. You believe civil lawsuits are also a piece of the picture. Why? What role do lawyers have in this?**

A: Every state has a criminal law against animal cruelty and neglect. In several of these states, there's no exemption for factory farming. So technically, any type of abuse that's illegal to do to a kitten in your house is illegal to do to a chicken on a factory farm. Meanwhile, in other states, there's a weak or partial exemption, such as saying that "customary" animal agriculture practices are exempt—but not abnormal or cruel ones.
Unfortunately, industrial animal agriculture has so much power in our society that it can sometimes feel like Big Ag is above the law. Police and prosecutors may be slow to investigate or pursue animal cruelty and neglect charges when the perpetrator is a powerful company. But cruelty is still a crime, and no one is above the law.

That's where civil litigation comes in. Several legal doctrines let plaintiffs sue in civil court for violation of a criminal law.

Ultimately, animals, workers, and companies themselves are better off when companies treat animals humanely, and when everyone follows the law. At Legal Impact for Chickens, we believe civil litigation can be a tool in making the humane treatment of animals and the compliance with laws a universal reality as quickly as possible. For example, LIC is suing KFC-supplier Case Farms for its pattern of gross mismanagement and cruelty toward newborn chicks. Case Farms has been documented knowingly operating faulty equipment, including a machine piston that repeatedly smashes chicks to death and a dangerous metal conveyor belt that traps and kills young birds. LIC's first lawsuit was a shareholder derivative suit against Costco executives for making Costco neglect and abandon chickens.

the individual interests and intrinsic value of all organisms and the belief that our values should be explicit.

It is easy for advocates to feel hopeless, since the public will rarely matches policy reality in this country, and because animals are far from top of mind for most people. Many animal advocates focus on good, concrete, personal things—like not buying or eating products made from dead animals or helping to rescue living ones. But collective action is still an option. Actions as simple as providing comments during legislative sessions on matters of wild animal well-being can be effective, and can help counterbalance the traditional hunting interests that always have their voices heard. We can also nominate people for wildlife commissions that come from different backgrounds, rather than the upper-class white men that tend to populate these bodies. Instead of operating on the margins of advocacy, Wildlife for All offers a pathway through which animal lovers can engage and stand a real chance of winning on important issues.

Our model of conservation is another manifestation of our exploitative economic system. Like our economic system, it has failed all but those who wish to take advantage of what it claims to preserve. The interests that sustain it do not represent the public will, and it is time for new, morally defensible principles to govern our relationship with the natural world. For the sake of the wild animals that live there and for our own good, public wild lands should be controlled democratically, rather than by hunters and their allies. By stewarding our public lands in the interests of all living upon them and of future generations of humans and non-humans, wild animals will be able to finally live in peace. ✣

# Q&A | SABOTAGING THE HUNTS | HUNT SABOTEURS ASSOCIATION

**For over 60 years, the Hunt Saboteurs Association in the U.K. has been working to thwart the practice of fox hunting through direct action, "sabbing" hunts so that hunters cannot successfully kill foxes. The organization's press officer, Rowan Hughes, responded to queries from *Current Affairs*.**

**Q: Could you tell us a bit about hunting culture in the U.K. and the controversy over it?**

**A:** The hunting community is very hierarchical, and historically those with money, land, and power have been involved in hunting. This makes it very hard to challenge, as hunts often have links with high ranking police, people within the court system etc. Hunting of this sort is very much a rural "sport" for the landed gentry, though not everyone involved is affluent, and it comes with a lot of pomp and pageantry. Nowadays, there is less wealth involved, but hunters hold onto the memory of being landed gentry who nobody had the power to oppose, and often trespass on farm land and do not respect the wishes of local communities if they do not support hunting. A lot of the controversy comes from the fact that it is a "sport" and foxes are raised, and encouraged by hunts to keep their numbers up so they are available to be hunted, as well as the absolute cruelty of tearing a fox apart with a pack of dogs.

**Q: What kinds of actions do hunt saboteurs engage in?**

**A:** Our primary aim is to save the life of the hunted animal, and we will often use the same techniques a huntsman uses to control his hounds—but we use them to misdirect the hounds away from their quarry, instead of towards it. For example, we carry hunting horns, but will mimic gathering calls, to bring the hounds towards us, where the huntsman would use calls encouraging the hounds to hunt on. We use homemade whips to emulate the cracking noise made by the hunters' whips. Hounds are trained to stop when they hear a whip crack, so saboteurs can give the hunted animal time to escape by putting themselves between the hounds and quarry, using these techniques.
We also use a selection of cameras, including body cams, long range camcorders and drones to observe the hunt, and will use this footage on social media to expose the reality of hunting, or sometimes as evidence to bring to court. A lot of what we do is run with the hunt, observing and anticipating their actions, and stepping in when a life is in danger. Hunting was once more accepted in rural communities, but video evidence is leading to more and more landowners dissociating themselves from the cruelty and violence that has been shown to be associated with hunting.

**Q: Why is sabotage your chosen form of action?**

**A:** The HSA has a saying that actions are everything, words mean nothing. Although this is of course not true, and campaigning through words is a big part of what we do, the sentiment is that we make change happen through action. We are the only organization who is on the ground, opposing hunts, saving lives, and using our energy, skills and action to directly sabotage hunting. It seems that direct sabotage—supported by the social media campaigning, lobbying, and legal work we do—is a successful combination.
We are seeing hunts close, dwindling supporter numbers, reduced county they have land-owner permission to enter, much reduced finances, and less legal pro-hunt bias year on year. Very often it is the hunts which have been the target of sustained saboteur attention who are struggling the most. Actually stepping in and stopping the kill is much more effective than just campaigning from the side-lines.


THE FAMILY GAME OF CARNIVOROUS FUN!
ALL THE ANIMALS BETTER RUN FROM THE...
Hungry Hungry Humans
IF IT WALKS... YOU CAN EAT IT!


3
Rat Poison

# why poison rats?

BY **WILLIAM MCAULIFFE**

There is infrastructure everywhere to which you never pay much attention—until you have a reason to care. Once you notice, you realize you've been taking something for granted about the communities we've created. Perhaps ramps were practically invisible until you became the one in a wheelchair or pushing a kid on a stroller. But those ramps aren't a given: it took a lot of advocacy to make cities more accessible. Or maybe traffic cameras never stand out until you get a speeding ticket. (Upon reflection, though, it's now rare to be in public and *not* fall under the gaze of a security camera).

And, if you're like most people, *bait boxes* are one of the features of modern life that still remain practically invisible to you. They're black, about 3 inches tall, 5 inches wide, and 10 inches long. They're as unremarkable as they are ubiquitous. They hug the sides of buildings everywhere—hotels, apartment buildings, subway stations. If you are among the minority that actually notices them, you know what's inside their small, circular opening: food laced with rat poison.

It's not shocking that rat poison is everywhere, as rats are commonplace in urban spaces. While there is remarkably little high-quality data on urban rat populations, researchers find that Baltimore, Maryland houses roughly one rat for every twelve people. New York City, meanwhile, is practically a rat metropolis, with nearly one for every four. What's striking is the passivity of the solution. Occasionally refill the box with more bait, and hope that when the rats do eventually keel over, they're far out of sight.

It's also not so surprising that we would prefer a turnkey solution over a laborious one. But the downsides of convenience here are rather stark. Besides perhaps glue traps, no other method of rodent control comes close in its inhumanity. The most common class of rodenticides are anticoagulants, which interfere with blood clotting. Common symptoms of their consumption include bloody diarrhea, cessation of eating, and difficulty breathing. If blood accumulates into the lungs, rats will experience a sensation similar to drowning. The whole process takes several days, and this is by design: the initial lack of symptoms prevents other rats from noticing the association between consuming the bait and being poisoned.

From a purely ethical standpoint, the case for limiting the use case of rodenticides to a last resort measure is clear. Indeed, there is consensus within the wildlife control profession that population control "should predictably and effectively cause the least animal welfare harms to the least number of animals." Pest managers also tend to profess adherence to *integrated pest management*, a philosophy based on minimizing the use of chemicals. For rats, that means first "setting traps, improving sanitation, and rodent proofing the building." Pesticides should only be tried "when non-chemical methods are inadequate."

Moreover, there are comparably passive solutions that are less cruel. In 2019, then-Borough President Eric Adams piloted drowning traps around Brooklyn. They are tall boxes, which lure rats up a lure to obtain bait; once they're at the top, they fall through a trap door into a pool of oil-alcohol solution. Contrary to the distributor's claims, the solution contains no miracle chemical that renders rats insensible instantly; it probably just covers up the smell of rotting corpses. Nevertheless, death only takes about three minutes, mercifully brief compared to poison. The passivity of rodenticides doesn't merely reflect the fact that we like to economize money and time. It also betrays our casual attitude towards rats—we don't feel we owe rats the consideration required to minimize the suffering we inflict upon them.

If we were willing to be inconvenienced, there is an entire arsenal of solutions available. Snap traps—the kind of archetypal spring-loaded devices seen in *Tom & Jerry* cartoons—can kill instantly under ideal conditions. But they must be set and frequently checked, while also taking care to responsibly dispose of carcasses. There are also novel contraceptive solutions that can be placed inside of baits in lieu of poison, like the straight-forwardly named Liquid Rat Birth Control. Aside from their greater expense, they also don't work right away—you have to wait for the adult population to die before noticing the benefits of a lower birth rate. To cut off rats' food supply, business-owners could put a tight lid on their dumpsters and lock them. But keeping the keys on hand is a pain, especially for the sanitation workers who make dozens of stops each day.

These humane alternatives are more expensive and labor-intensive, and consequently have mostly only been adopted by small, wealthy, progressive cities like Newton, Massachusetts and Malibu, California. The much-celebrated appointment of a "rat czar" in New York City may foreshadow that reform is also coming to cities with more poverty and complicated sanitation protocols. But that willpower isn't coming from a sudden swell of sympathy for rats—members of the czar's volunteer taskforce "are united by [their] visceral hatred of rats." They're diversifying their tactics out of a frank recognition that rodenticides don't work as a stand-alone solution.

Even those who squeal when they see rats would probably acknowledge that they don't "deserve" an agonizing death in any cosmic sense, and that it would be unseemly to take pleasure in their pain. But as a vector for leptospirosis, hantavirus, and other diseases, they do pose a clear and present danger. As a result, it's probably not possible to abolish rodenticide just by pointing out that it's inhumane. Responding to an open letter from animal activists expressing their outrage towards the drowning traps, Eric Adams quipped, "We can never put rats over children, and I am not going to do that."

It is possible to flip the think-of-the-children messaging strategy on its head, though. In a series of focus groups and interviews, my colleagues and I at Rethink Priorities, a think tank focused on neglected problems, asked American adults to rate the persuasiveness of six different anti-rodenticide messages we have seen in recent years. By far the most convincing message we showed them reads:

*Rodenticides pose a danger to those we want most to protect: Our children and pets. Each year, thousands of children mistake rodenticides for an edible treat, sending them to the hospital. Pet dogs and cats risk hospitalization and even death from eating dead rodents or the rodenticide baits themselves. Some of the common rodenticides have antidotes, but other common ones do not.*

Unsurprisingly, information about the negative effects on rats themselves was never mentioned as the most persuasive —and in fact, several participants rated it as the least persuasive. Anti-rodenticide activists tend to be savvy enough to mention this argument last, if at all. Yet, they tend to give equal emphasis to wildlife that are accidentally poisoned when they consume rats as they do to pets and kids. A representative example is the billboard campaign funded by Cities Against Rat Poisons, a collective of grassroots organizations. "Rodents aren't the only ones poisoned by rat poison," the ad reads, set against the outlines of various animals: not only a housecat, a pet dog, and a human baby, but also an owl, a mountain lion, and a hawk.

Even though our findings suggest that wildlife-focused messaging doesn't pull on everyone's heartstrings, groups like Raptors Are the Solution have successfully used this tactic to secure bans on the most powerful anticoagulant rodenticides in California and British Columbia (though they're still legal in commercial settings, which have even more rats), and similar legislation has been introduced elsewhere. The group's campaign featured majestic photos of eagles, owls, and raptors—the more sympathetic victims of rodenticide. Unfortunately, centering wildlife has its limitations. For one, not all rat poisons have been demonstrated to pose as large of a threat to wildlife. That means that even in California and British Columbia, non-anticoagulant rodenticides are still available at your local hardware store. Ironically, some of them have no antidotes for pets, like bromethalin.

More fundamentally, it's worth reflecting on why we are willing to inconvenience ourselves for raptors, but not for rats. Raptors are also threatening when they are in close proximity. That doesn't make them deserving of torture. Unlike raptors, rats are fellow mammals, and have some remarkably human-like behaviors. Why is it that sticking up for rats is interpreted as "siding with them" over humans, when we do not otherwise view the choice of population management strategy as a zero-sum conflict?

That's a rhetorical question, because there is no mystery here. When we see rats scurrying around a restaurant patio, we don't think of them as part of the same rodent family as the cute mouse you had as a pet growing up; nor as laboratory rats, whose pointless plight might steer you away from certain cosmetics brands. Those were clean animals, innocent of any wrongdoing. The rats who seem suspiciously close to the kitchen where your ravioli was made are large, dirty, invading your personal space. In other words, they are *pests*. We can't help but feel fear and revulsion in their presence. When we're acting in self-defense, we don't feel much inner turmoil about the fact that we didn't make their eradication easy on them.

Still, I hold out hope that there is a way to frame opposition to rodenticides that centers the welfare of rats. The truth is that

pests don't simply reach infestation levels in a vacuum. They reproduce at prodigious levels because we provide them with ample food and shelter to do so. We could wait to bring out our trash until the sanitation workers come. We could seal cracks in buildings so that they make a home elsewhere. But we don't, because that takes a lot of effort for a problem that can always be mitigated by killing them later.

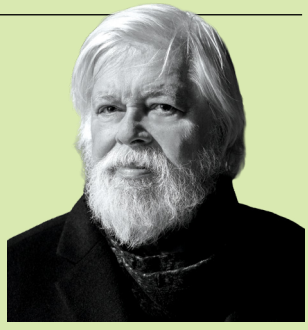
This principle of responsibility through complicity is one we accept in other contexts. If you are a landlord and fail to keep up basic maintenance on your property, you are responsible for any injuries or damages that ensue. If you don't get your cat spayed, you are obligated to get her litter of kittens adopted. If you ignore warnings of misconduct in your institution, you are on the hook if they turn out to be substantiated.

# Q&A

## WHY SINK WHALING SHIPS?

## CAPTAIN PAUL WATSON

**ANTI-WHALING ACTIVIST**



**Captain Paul Watson is a Canadian environmental activist and co-founder of Greenpeace who later founded the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. Known for his direct action tactics against illegal whaling, overfishing, and ocean exploitation, Watson has spent decades at sea, leading controversial but influential campaigns to defend marine life. He joined Current Affairs to explain why he has spent his career ramming and sinking whaling ships.**

**Q: Could you tell us a bit about your efforts to stop whaling? How have you attempted to intervene in order to save whales?**

A: I began my opposition to whaling in 1974 as a cofounder of the Greenpeace Foundation. I served as first officer on all the early Greenpeace anti-whaling voyages, and in 1977 I established the Sea Shepherd movement to intervene against illegal whaling operations by using a strategy that I called "aggressive nonviolence"—meaning intervention without causing any injury.

In 1979, I hunted down and rammed the pirate whaler *Sierra* and later sank it. After it was repaired in 1980, we sank it dockside, along with two of the four Spanish whaling ships. We then worked with the South African government to have the pirate whalers *Susan* and *Theresa* seized and they were later sunk by the South African Navy. We also shut down the pirate whaler *Astrid* in the Canary Islands by posting reward posters all over the island offering $25,000 to anybody who could sink it.As a result they couldn't trust their crew, so the vessel was sold and never killed another whale. So, within one year we had shut down all pirate whaling operations in the Atlantic Ocean. In 1981 my crew and I invaded Soviet Siberia to document illegal whaling activities. We escaped from a confrontation with the Soviet Navy and delivered the evidence to the International Whaling Commission.

In 1982 we shut down the dolphin killing in Iki Island, Japan and later we set up the Cove Guardian program to intervene against the killing of dolphins in Taiji, Japan. Since 1983 we have been intervening against the killing of pilot whales and dolphins in the Danish Faroe Islands.

In 1986, we sank two of the four Icelandic whaling vessels and destroyed the whale processing plant. I turned myself in to face charges, but Iceland didn't charge me because they knew that to put me on trial would be to put themselves on trial.

Between 1992 and 2006 we sank 4 Norwegian whaling vessels in order to make them pay higher insurance premiums for their illegal whaling activities.

In 2005 we set out to chase the Japanese whaling fleet out of the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary—which we succeeded in doing by 2016. Recently, we shut down Icelandic whaling activities for three years beginning in 2023.

**Q: Is there a legal double standard applied to what you do versus what the whalers do?**

A: The legality is very clear. Beginning in 1986 the International Whaling Commission imposed a global moratorium on commercial whaling. The whaling ships that we sank in Iceland that year were in violation of that moratorium, as were the whaling ships of Norway and later Japan. I established Sea Shepherd as a means to oppose illegal whaling operations. For this purpose, I created the strategy of aggressive nonviolence, and after 50 years of operations I can truthfully state that not a single person was ever injured—nor have I ever been convicted of a felony crime, nor have I lost a commercial lawsuit. It is my position that we uphold the laws, we don't break the law. We operate within the boundaries of the law and of practicality. There is a double standard in that our upholding international conservation law results in our persecution and the accusation that we're "pirates" or "eco terrorists."

The whalers that we oppose are clearly in violation of the law, but because they have the support of their national governments they get away with what they're doing. They abuse the law in order to prevent our interventions.

**Q: Do you think direct action like this is effective? Why?**

A: When it comes to whaling, I believe that direct action is the most effective approach. There is no argument to say otherwise. Our actions speak for themselves. In the Southern Ocean we saved the lives of 6,500 whales. Overall, through the decades, I believe that we've saved the lives of tens of thousands of whales that would have been killed illegally if not for our intervention.

I am unconcerned if people do not approve of this approach, but my position is: find a whale that disapproves of our actions and we might reconsider. We didn't ram and sink those whaling ships for people. We did so for the whales. They are our clients.

In all of these cases, *you* should have taken swift action to prevent the negative repercussions. If you fail to act, the outcome falls on you: whether that's a tenant with a hole in their roof, eight new cats in your living room, or a hefty lawsuit.

Similarly, it is your responsibility to make an earnest effort to prevent rat population levels from growing. While it's possible to live-trap a couple of rats scurrying around in your pantry, there is no humane way to knock down a major population in short order. Plus, you know that once the problem gets that bad, you'll be too distressed to be picky about how it's solved.

Of course, I am talking about "your" responsibility, as if you might be solely responsible for a rat problem outside your home. In reality, you might not even be responsible for rats in your own home; it could be your neighbors' hygiene problem. The abundance of food, water, and shelter for rats is often a collective failure to design and adhere to best practices. The resulting diffusion of responsibility probably also explains why we don't feel all that personally responsible for how we end up killing them. In general, I accept that the systemic origins of problems places some hazy limit on the personal responsibility we have for solving them. Maybe, as long as you—personally—keep your *own* space clean and reserve your *own* use of poison as a genuine last resort, you've done your duty.

On the other hand, in cases where you could easily affect the system, maybe failure to do so raises the specter of complicity. If you belong to a homeowners' association, you're well-positioned to convince your HOA that it should ask its pest management company to use a poison-free approach. I'd concede it's probably smart to start by talking about the dogs and cats who live in the building. But somewhere in there, see if you can't mention the benefits to rats themselves as well. ✣

# Q&A

## REPORTING ON ANIMAL WELFARE

## MARINA BOLOTNIKOVA

**AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST**


**Marina Bolotnikova is an award winning journalist whose work focuses on factory farming and animal activism. She has previously contributed to *Current Affairs* and presently serves as an editor for *Vox*'s Future Perfect.**

**Q: What are some of the stories you've covered that you think are the most important?**

**A:** I'd point to a 2023 feature I wrote for *Vox*, "The bitter civil war dividing American veterinarians." It's about the veterinary profession's support for factory farming, and a movement of insurgent veterinarians fighting to change that. Most people interact with vets to get medical care for their beloved cats and dogs, but there's a whole other side to the profession that's deeply captivating, surprising, and disturbing. Organized veterinary medicine is among the most important defenders and legitimizers of factory farm practices in the U.S., something that has deep roots in the profession's history. The history of human relationships with animals is largely a story of violence and exploitation, so it's of course unsurprising that veterinary medicine has evolved to facilitate that exploitation. As one veterinarian told me, "the official stance of the veterinary profession in the U.S. often serves to legitimize practices that cause extreme, prolonged pain and suffering on a massive scale. The veterinary profession helps shield such practices from questioning and criticism."

That story connects to a series of pieces I wrote in 2022-2023 on the rapid rise of "ventilation shutdown"—a method that over the last few years has been used to mass exterminate tens of millions of chickens and turkeys on factory farms hit by bird flu by inducing heatstroke in them with industrial heaters. And those killings are fully paid for by public dollars. It's among the most shocking recent innovations in an industry already replete with horrors, and the veterinary profession has been central in enabling its spread.

The last thing I'd add is that last year, we published "How Factory Farming Ends," a big package of stories on the movement to end factory farming, with pieces from me and lots of fantastic writers in this space, contributing their best ideas on what it will take to solve this incredibly difficult, wicked problem.

**Q: What are the ones you wish more people knew about?**

**A:** Earlier this year I wrote a comic on the life of a dairy cow that I wish more people had read! It goes through a dairy cow's life from birth to death, unpacking what makes the dairy industry so strange and disturbing and heartbreaking.

I'd also point to "What if AI treats humans the way we treat animals?", a think essay on what fears of AI destroying the world and killing us all really represent: our anxieties about the fragility and mistreatment of animality—our own, as well as that of nonhuman animals.

Finally, I recently wrote about an ascendant set of ideas in wonky future of food debates that I think of as "anti-anti-factory farming." According to that school of thought, factory farming, while inhumane and not ideal, is the only way we can meet humanity's growing demand for meat without destroying the planet. You see this argument in new books like Michael Grunwald's *We Are Eating the Earth*, which is a book I really like on the whole and think is worth reading, except that I disagree with its defenses of factory farming. But I think the anti-anti-factory farming perspective is really important to understand and come to grips with, because there is some truth to it: Factory farms don't exist merely to be evil, but because they produce animal products with as little land and resources as possible. By most measures, intensive animal agriculture is more sustainable than what people think of as humane, pastoral animal farms. And much as I'd rather we convince the world to simply eat less meat, it's going to be really, really hard to do that.


This classic card-matching memory game has a new twist to incorporate the modern realities of poor fisheries management!

## GAME INCLUDES 52-CARD SET:

**1 SALMON**
**1 TROUT**
AND
**50 CARP!**


Use your memory to see if you can make matching sets of four from your fish cards! Just watch out for those invasive carp!

**NEW!** Go Fish Invasive Species: Expansion Pack

INCLUDES 50 MORE CARP!

# SLAUGHTERHOUSE CAPITALISM

BY **VASILE STANESCU**

The entire modern industrial system—from Amazon warehouses where workers have to pee in bottles, to Tesla factories where Elon Musk tracks every movement—originated in one place: Chicago slaughterhouses, where capitalists first figured out how to turn living beings into perfectly controlled objects.

This is not a metaphor. Henry Ford literally studied the "disassembly lines" where workers carved up animal carcasses and realized he could apply the same techniques to human workers building cars. As Ford wrote in his autobiography, the Chicago slaughterhouse was "the first moving line ever installed. The idea came in a general way from the overhead trolley that the Chicago packers use in dressing beef."

Think about that. The assembly line, the foundation of modern capitalism, came from perfecting methods to slice up animals while—and this is the important part—preventing them from resisting. And once capitalists figured out how to turn animals into component parts (just a leg, just a throat, just a head), they realized they could do the same thing to human workers (just a hand, just an arm, just a cutting motion). Ideas of how to prevent human resistance came from first figuring out how to prevent animal resistance.

The term "Fordism" to define capitalism was first coined by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* in the 1930s, and the term "post-Fordism" became a defining term for critiquing capitalism since the 1980s. However, we do not live under "post-Fordist" capitalism. This title suggests that Ford invented that which he merely borrowed. We live under *slaughterhouse capitalism*: a system designed from the ground up to treat all animals, human and nonhuman, as simply raw material for profit. The term "slaughterhouse capitalism" reminds us that the violence we see, all the time, under "post-Fordist capitalism" is not some type of quirk or mistake, a failure or reformable feature, but instead the original and foundational purpose of the entire system—from the moment it was first designed.

The system was always designed to control, to prevent resistance, to produce death as a form of profit. The term "slaughterhouse capitalism" serves to remind us that the capitalist system we live in derives not from the cleanliness of a Ford car factory but instead from the blood-soaked reality of the Chicago stockyards. And its very first lie was this: that the animals being killed could never even speak in the first place.

## ANIMALS AREN'T VOICELESS—WE JUST AREN'T LISTENING

The biggest lie animal agriculture tells isn't about "happy cows" or "free-range chickens." It's that animals can't communicate their own desires. Even some animal advocates perpetuate this nonsense.

This is, of course, obvious bullshit. Animals speak constantly, as researcher Eva Meijer has documented. Dolphins call each other by name. Elephants use different alarm calls for different threats. Ravens demonstrate referential communication by using gestures that direct another bird's attention toward external objects, a capacity once believed to be uniquely human. Squid

communicate through skin patterns that function as structured language.

One wonders if the people who make this argument have even met an animal. Abbey is the dog who lives with me, and I can understand when she is scared of thunder, when she is sad, when her legs hurt her because she is getting older and it's getting cold, her favorite foods, and if she wants me to touch her or to leave her alone. If she were really "voiceless," how would I understand all of these things? Because, of course, animals can communicate. Not being able to fully understand other animals does not mean that they cannot communicate, any more than me not knowing Chinese somehow means billions of Chinese people do not know how to speak. It only means I have yet to learn how to listen.

The most basic acts of communication by animals—wanting to stay with their children, not wanting to die, wanting to be free—anyone can understand. No one can watch a documentary about what animals go through in the slaughterhouse, like *Earthlings*, and somehow not understand that the animals are suffering, resisting, and wanting to be free. Just because we can't talk about Marx together does not mean we can't communicate. It does not mean that we cannot be in political solidarity.

And here's the main takeaway: it's not animal rights activists who falsely "anthropomorphize" animals. It's farmers. After studying farm memoirs for 15 years, I've seen that farmers constantly interpret animal behavior. The twist: They just always interpret it as consent.

Take Catherine Friend's memoir about running a "humane" farm, titled *Hit by a Farm: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Barn*. She describes forcibly holding down Ambrosia, a female goat, and forcing her to mate with a male goat she clearly didn't want to have sex with. Friend documents Ambrosia's repeated refusal in agonizing detail. She understands the refusal perfectly. Then she ignores it because it was the only way to run her farm at a profit. Afterward, Friend makes this "joke": "Can I still call myself a feminist?"

It is not that farmers can't understand that animals are communicating. Friend would never have made the "joke" if she couldn't understand what was happening. It's just that they choose to ignore it. But that is not animals' failure to communicate; that is humans' failure to listen.

## "EFFEMINATE RICE EATERS": THE COLONIAL LOGIC OF MEAT EATING

Here's something else you probably didn't know: the modern obsession with eating massive amounts of meat isn't "natural" or "traditional". It comes from colonial propaganda designed to justify white supremacy.

In 1884, a respected medical researcher named J. Leonard Corning wrote that colonized populations lacked "intellectual vigor," not because of race, but because they were "effeminate rice eaters" instead of meat-eaters like the "flesh-eating nations" who were "ever more aggressive." He literally argued that "the unbroken triumph of the Anglo-Saxon race" came from being "carnivorous men" who could dominate the "effeminate rice eaters of India and China."

Far from some fringe racist screed, this was considered mainstream scientific opinion. The appeal was that diet, unlike race, could supposedly be changed. So colonial ideologists could claim they weren't being racist while arguing that colonized people just needed to eat more Western meat to become civilized. Food writers bragged that "forty thousand of the beef-fed British govern and control ninety millions of the rice-eating natives of India." Doctors declared rice-eaters to be "a wretched, impotent, and effeminate race." White bread and beef became the "power diet" that supposedly explained why Europeans could conquer the world.

But here's the crucial part: this colonial ideology didn't stay overseas. It also came home to shape American labor politics. If meat consumption was what made men strong, virile, and powerful—what prevented "brain exhaustion" and maintained masculine vigor—then white workers needed meat to prove they weren't weak like those "effeminate rice eaters." When Chinese immigrants arrived in America, white workers used this exact same logic, positioning themselves as the "beef-fed" men who deserved higher wages, as opposed to Chinese workers who could supposedly survive on rice alone.

This is where the colonial meat ideology directly created modern factory farming. When white working-class men demanded higher wages, they articulated their demands as a necessary means to buy meat for their families. As historian E. Melanie DuPuis discovered, they used "nativist anti-Chinese arguments" to demand "a living wage that would support their meat-eating," treating meat consumption as "a privilege of white citizenship."

The logic was clear: real American men ate meat, unlike those "effeminate rice eaters" from China. Union organizers shaped their demands around this racialized need to afford the masculine diet that would keep them strong and prevent them from becoming weak like the immigrants.

But here's the capitalist "genius": instead of raising wages, the state and market collaborated to make meat artificially cheap. Rather than pay workers more, they figured out how to bring the cost of meat down by inventing the factory farm system. The surplus value of the industrialized workers—whose wages were not raised, and who were steadily more exploited—was compensated by the surplus value of the animal. The steady ratcheting up of the exploitation of the animal body was tied to the steady ratcheting up of the exploitation of the human animal body. Under slaughterhouse capitalism, animals are always exploited more so human workers can be exploited more.

This is hardly ancient history. Did you ever stop to wonder why, during the height of COVID, when even schools were shut down, Donald Trump declared slaughterhouses "essential to national security?" Even as these plants became disease superspreader sites—with management literally taking out bets on how many workers would get sick or die—the government understood the unspoken "deal" operating between the exploitation of workers and the exploitation of animals. Remember: making death for profit is the original goal of the system itself. You can still hear echoes of this colonial meat ideology today: from Joe Rogan's obsession with hunting and "carnivore diets" to the way masculinity is still tied to meat consumption in popular culture, to the "alt-right's" obsession with eating meat and drinking milk.

Or, consider the 2020 COVID outbreak at Tyson's Waterloo, Iowa plant. As more than 1,000 workers became infected and at least five died, managers allegedly organized a cash betting pool on how many employees would test positive. According to court records, supervisors were told to ignore symptoms and return to work. One manager reportedly told a sick employee, "We all have symptoms. You have a job to do." This apparent callousness is the exact logic of slaughterhouse capitalism: death as profit and workers reduced to replaceable bodies. In his 1922 autobiography, Ford wrote that without "the most rigid discipline" there would be chaos; a century later, discipline meant forcing workers back onto the kill floor in the middle of a pandemic. During the COVID epidemic, "the kill floor" took on a double meaning. In reality, it always has.

## CAPITALISM'S HIDDEN STENCH

Every time you see workers treated "like animals," you're seeing the legacy of the Chicago stockyards.

The techniques developed to control animal bodies and prevent their resistance became the template for controlling human bodies. The overhead drag lines, conveyor belts, and automated systems that disciplined animals into profitable submission became the model for disciplining workers into profitable submission.

A management manual from a Chicago packing plant explained the philosophy: "There is no room for individuality or artistry in beef butchering. The worker does not decide where or how to make his cut. All cuts are by the book, the instructions are very exact." Sound like your job?

The hidden truth in the term "factory farm" is that it was, in reality, the farm—i.e., the slaughterhouse itself—which gave rise to the factory, and not the other way around. And now all of us live in factory farms of ever greater control and regimentation. And so when we see an Amazon warehouse in which workers' lives have become so regimented, so machine-like, that they are not even allowed pee breaks, what we are witnessing is the ongoing effects of slaughterhouse capitalism, of workers as mere animals, mere bodies, less than the machines they operate, even if no one can still smell the stench of the

# Q&A

## HOW TO CUT OFF THE MONEY

### FIONA CAMERON

**FOUNDER, SINERGIA ANIMAL**

**Sinergia Animal is an international animal protection organization working in countries of the Global South to reduce the suffering of farmed animals. They are currently running a divestment campaign to pressure the World Bank to cut off factory farm funding. Fiona Cameron of Sinergia spoke to *Current Affairs*.**

**Q: Why is cutting off the financing an important part of addressing factory farming? Tell us a bit more about what kinds of pressure can be exerted this way.**

A: To address the core problems of factory farming, we have to follow the money.

Banks are key drivers of factory farm expansion. Much financing supporting industrial animal agriculture comes from large commercial institutions and multilateral development banks (MDBs). These financial actors enable a food system that is unsustainable, unethical, and increasingly dangerous. Factory farming contributes significantly to climate change, biodiversity loss, and zoonotic disease emergence; problems leading to serious economic consequences. Climate-related disasters disrupt supply chains, drive up feed costs, and cause mass animal deaths. Disease outbreaks linked to industrial farming cost billions and erode market stability.

Banks can help shift this system by integrating environmental and animal welfare standards into their lending policies. With proper due diligence, they can ensure funding no longer flows to farms that pollute ecosystems, exploit animals, or endanger public health. Unfortunately, most banks prioritize short-term profits over long-term sustainability. At Sinergia Animal, we believe cutting off financial support to factory farms is a key tool to transform the system. Banks profit nicely from the current model—often at the expense of animals, the environment, and smallholder farmers—but they're not immune to pressure.

Our demand is simple: stop financing the worst forms of industrial animal agriculture, and redirect support to small-scale producers who follow agroecological methods and uphold high animal welfare standards. The pressure doesn't stop with banks. Shareholders can file resolutions. Customers can move their money to ethical institutions. Regulators must align financial flows with international commitments on climate, biodiversity, and sustainability. This is especially urgent for development banks, which use public funds and should be held to a higher standard. Development banks like the International Finance Corporation (IFC) wield strong influence. Over 90 private banks follow the IFC's Performance Standards, but its animal welfare guidelines are voluntary. They need to be mandatory, setting a precedent to reshape expectations across the financial sector. Why should taxpayer funds subsidize systems that harm animals, damage the environment, and endanger public health?

stockyards from which it arose.

Animal liberation is not charity—it is solidarity. It's recognizing that the same system exploiting animals is exploiting humans, and that we cannot defeat either of them in isolation. This is the deepest meaning of "slaughterhouse capitalism": no fight against the slaughterhouses will ever be successful if we do not also confront capitalism. Likewise, no fight against capitalism will fully succeed unless we also fight against slaughterhouses. To use the language of a scholar for one second, they are "co-constitutive phenomena"—in other words, they make each other. As a scholar who studies and critiques both forms of politics—fighting against speciesism and fighting against capitalism—I get pushback from both groups, all the time.

I have heard Peter Singer, the purported father of animal rights, speak on several occasions. Often, he receives the identical question: What about capitalism? Every time, he has given the same answer: "I think we have enough on our plate dealing with animals without confronting capitalism." He repeated the sentiment recently on his Facebook page, writing, "Some people talk about overthrowing capitalism; it's more realistic to encourage capitalists to do better." However, from Henry Ford studying the disassembly plants of Chicago slaughterhouses to invent the new assembly line of mechanized production, to the colonial legacy of "effeminate rice eaters," which forced colonized populations to consume ever greater amounts of meat and dairy, to the forgotten history of the support of cheap meat as a way to buy off the working class—capitalism and speciesism have always constituted a single and reinforcing system. We cannot challenge speciesism without confronting capitalism; we cannot confront capitalism without confronting speciesism.

At the same time, in anti-capitalist spaces, I am told, all the time, some version of "there is no ethical consumption under capitalism." And, of course, they are correct, but what they fail to understand is that animal liberation is not about ethical consumption. It is effective resistance and liberation in solidarity with some of the most oppressed beings on the planet.

As my colleague Sarat Colling spent her life documenting, animals constantly resist. They escape from slaughterhouses, attack their captors, and choose death over captivity. A cow and calf once fled a farm by swimming across a pond and jumping fences to reach an animal sanctuary. Four baboons escaped a research facility by rolling a barrel into position and jumping over walls. A chicken traveled three miles over two months to reunite with her best friend after being sold for slaughter.

These aren't cute animal stories. These are acts of rebellion. Rebellion against captivity, against control, against oppression and violence, and fundamentally rebellion against having their life turned into an object for profit. In other words, all the same goals and reasons we oppose capitalism in the first place.

What we need, what we have always needed, is solidarity. Solidarity not only among humans but across species, to fight together until every cage is empty—the one that holds the prisoner, the animals, and the human workers—in a shared system of struggle towards actual liberation. And what is needed is solidarity between different groups of humans, between those of us who are fighting against speciesism and those of us who are fighting against capitalism, because both of us are, in reality, dying under the same system of slaughterhouse capitalism. Building that solidarity, building each other up, supporting our shared struggles against oppression, seeing the intersecting connections between the oppression of capitalism and animal oppression, opposing slaughterhouse capitalism in all its different forms—that is how we win. And we are going to win.

My little house gremlin when...


ADOPT your very own ANNOYING COMPANION at your LOCAL ANIMAL SHELTER

You won't regret it!*

*most of the time.

# THE DARK, UNREGULATED WORLD OF ROADSIDE ZOOS

BY **NICOLE JOHNSON**

"The indoor enclosure that confined the lioness, Nasha, was wet and soiled with excessive feces, urine, soil, and food wastes with no clean bedding provided," reads the December 2024 inspection report for a roadside zoo in coastal Oregon. The report, completed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, paints a grim and detailed picture of systemic animal neglect: "On closer observation, Nasha's coat was matted with what appeared to be feces on various areas of her body, she was wide-eyed, crouched and reluctant to approach the enclosure door."

Over the course of one year, the USDA visited the West Coast Game Park Safari in Bandon, Oregon a total of ten times, citing them with 80 violations. Their reports describe animals being starved, crammed into unsanitary conditions, failing to receive medical care, and living in enclosures too small for normal postural movements. Some describe the mysterious death of several animals at the facility. Yet even as USDA inspectors personally witnessed these atrocities, the park remained open.

The roadside zoo, marketed as "America's largest wild animal

petting park," was finally shut down in May after state, local and federal authorities raided the facility. Along with hundreds of suffering animals, police discovered 44 firearms on the property (including one modified into a machine gun), $1.6 million in a concrete vault, and 80 grams of methamphetamine. Most of the animals were relocated. Three needed to be euthanized—a camel, chicken and kinkajou.

The zoo's owner, 52-year-old Bryan Tenney, was initially arrested on drug charges and was later hit with more than 300 indictments for second-degree animal neglect. But after more than a decade of damning inspections by federal agencies, the real question is: what took so long?

As a local of southern Oregon, I first discovered the inspection reports for the West Coast Game Park Safari earlier this year while doing research to end the use of wild animals in circus performances. Since then, I have championed for the animals within that park and beyond, pouring countless hours into research and meeting with other advocates. What I've discovered is appalling. Across the country, wild animals living in zoos and circuses exist in a legal grey area—and the ones who are responsible for ensuring their proper care aren't even trying. While the hundreds of animals left to suffer in that decrepit Oregon zoo have now been relocated, there are likely thousands more just like them.

## WHO'S SUPPOSED TO PROTECT THESE ANIMALS?

The care of these creatures falls under the jurisdiction of several state and federal agencies.

First, there's the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), a branch of the USDA, which issues licenses and inspects facilities under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA). The act is supposed to guarantee humane care for animals used in exhibits and research facilities, as well as those being transported, yet loopholes allow abusers to keep returning.

To become licensed as an exhibitor, one must submit an application that includes details of the facility, which must then pass a USDA inspection. Licenses are technically denied to any applicant who has violated animal cruelty laws in the last three years, but once those three years are up, they're inexplicably free to apply again. This allows for shady facilities to be run by even shadier owners—people who should never be allowed near animals, let alone to profit off them.

Take, for example, Great Cats World Park: a USDA-licensed facility that is also based in Oregon but travels around the country performing at Renaissance fairs. Its owner, Craig Wagner, has a lengthy rap sheet of mistreating animals. First, he was convicted of animal neglect in Wisconsin in the 1990s for failing to provide enough food and water for his cats, landing him a $40,000 fine and nine months in jail. Later, while running a park in Minnesota, he was cited again for withholding food and water. Two years after, his business partner was found mauled to death by a tiger on the compound.

After relocating to Oregon, Wagner pled guilty to forging documents in order to smuggle an ocelot across state lines—and yet the park stayed open with only a $10,000 fine. In 2011, one of his tigers attacked a toddler in the gift shop and another bit a teenager, according to a civil complaint by the USDA. Years later, an employee was hospitalized from a lion bite. Today he is *still operating* with a valid USDA license and his park is open to the public. If you feel like visiting, however, maybe keep an eye out—a jaguar escaped its enclosure just two months ago.

The USDA is not the only federal agency responsible for these animals' wellbeing. Some animals residing within these parks fall under the Endangered Species Act, which is also enforced by the Departments of Interior and Commerce. But zoos and circuses often sidestep the rules, exploiting exemptions like claiming that their ownership of an endangered animal somehow "enhance[s] the survival" of the species.

Lastly, there is the Big Cat Safety Act, signed into law in December of 2022, which prevents the private ownership of big cats like tigers, lions, and cougars. It also restricts the public's ability to interact with them at roadside zoos, imposing fines of up to $20,000 and/or imprisonment of up to five years for violators. This federal act is enforced by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The law gained traction partly due to *Tiger King*: the 2020 Netflix docu-series that exposed the shady world of big cat breeding, made Joe Exotic a household name, and fueled countless memes. The show's anti-hero Carole Baskin was one of the leading advo-

cates to push the Big Cat Safety Act through Congress. While its passage was a big step, it isn't always enforced: *Tiger King*'s Bhagavan "Doc" Antle is still actively posting videos of the public interacting with tiger cubs on his Facebook page and advertising "up close and personal encounters" with the animals, in clear violation of the law. Yet federal investigators have not filed any injunctions, despite Antle being recently placed on house arrest for violating the Lacey Act, a U.S. law that combats illegal wildlife trafficking. (Joe Exotic might also be abusing animals to this day, if he wasn't in prison for hiring two hitmen to kill Carole Baskin.)

If *Tiger King* showed us anything, it's that spectacle sells, and the law still struggles to keep up with the people profiting off that spectacle. Circuses across the country still use wild animals in their shows—such as Jordan World Circus, Culpepper & Merriweather, Shrine Circuses, and others—forcing animals to live in cramped cages and often only releasing them to perform.

The animals are often treated inhumanely, yet the show goes on. For example, the Jordan World Circus actually lost its exhibitor license in the 1990s after repeated violations, including keeping tigers in travel cages for up to eleven days without exercise, forcing sick cats to jump through flaming hoops, and delaying veterinary care for a malnourished tiger with a broken leg. You might be wondering: how is this circus still in business, touring cross-country with elephants, camels, and bison in tow? It turns out, even though they lost their license, they're able to *lease animals* from licensed exhibitors with no consequences.

Last summer, one of their rented elephants made national headlines when she escaped from a performance in Montana, weaving through traffic until she was recaptured—a full year after the elephant's owner claimed she would be retiring in a sanctuary "with the rest of [her] herd on 200 acres of grass." The circus who leased the animal, Carson & Barnes, was cited by the USDA, but Jordan World Circus wasn't. Both facilities are still allowed to use elephants in their shows.

## VIOLATIONS WITHOUT CONSEQUENCES

The USDA's inspection system is supposed to help animals, but it mostly ends up documenting neglect without fixing it. According to the agency's guide, inspectors are supposed to take photos of any violations, which are categorized by severity: noncritical, critical, and direct—which means an animal is actively in danger or being harmed. If a facility receives either a critical or direct violation during their inspection, they are given a timeline to correct the issue, after which an inspector will return to ensure it has been rectified. If not, the facility is simply given a "repeat" violation. That essentially means you can repeatedly fail to provide fresh water or starve your animals to the point where they are visibly underweight and the USDA will simply write "repeat violation" in your file.

APHIS inspectors have the power to confiscate animals when they are "in a state of suffering" and "there is no evidence relief will be provided in the immediate future." But in practice, these creatures are often left behind.

Take the West Coast Game Park Safari in Oregon, for example, where local authorities confiscated hundreds of animals earlier this year. Nearly ten months earlier in August 2024, USDA inspectors cited the park for the conditions of several sheep and one yak, whose matted coats were in desperate need of shearing. Their coats were moist—likely from urine and feces—causing flies to swarm the animals. In a follow-up visit, inspectors learned that the yak was no longer there, with no record of it being sold either.

A few months later in December, a USDA inspector noted that the park's big cats were visibly thinner than in the previous inspection and agitated due to hunger: "It is unclear how long the cats were without food or were rationed," the document reads. That inspection also revealed two nanny goats, with baby kids on their side, that were kept in an enclosure without food or water. When the facility representative provided water for them, the goats drank until the container was empty, then finished the next container immediately after.

Not providing food and water are both listed as reasons for confiscation in the agency's guide. So why were the animals left there? This failure to take any enforcement action led to prolonged suffering. When local authorities finally stepped in, it was already too late for some of these animals and three had to be euthanized. (APHIS has not responded to any of my requests for comment regarding this failure, nor have they responded to my Freedom of Information Act requests regarding this park.)

Confiscating the animals isn't the only option for inspectors, however. The USDA does have another enforcement route, but it involves a whole bunch of bureaucracy and red tape. Inspectors can refer cases to be reviewed by the Investigative and Enforcement Services (IES), who will perform their own inspection, then either issue *yet another* warning or negotiate a settlement. If the violator doesn't agree to settle (and if the Office of General Counsel says there's legal grounds for a case), then a hearing is brought before an administrative judge. The judge can suspend or revoke a license, but because these courts are civil, no criminal charges are filed. It is possible to get the Department of Justice involved if the crimes are severe enough—but this typically only happens in cases of dog fighting rings, like the one run by former NFL player Michael Vick.

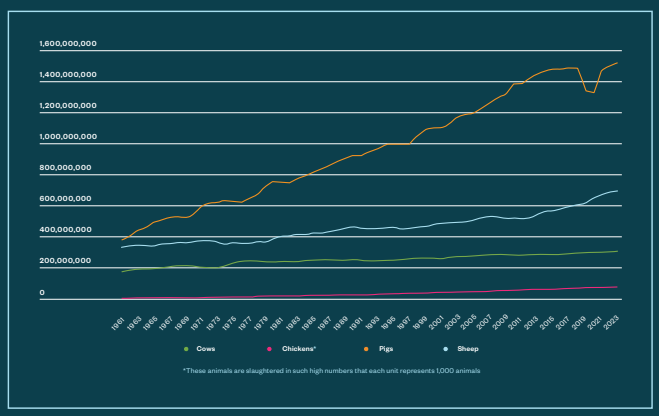
When inspectors do pursue enforcement, cases often take months or years before they even end up in court. There is the case of Vernon Miller, owner of Dutch Creek Farm Animal Park in rural Indiana, who collected a whopping 90 violations over a two-year span before his license was *temporarily suspended*, not revoked. Miller has violations as both a breeder and as an exhibitor, including a two-month stretch where seven animals passed away unexpectedly in his care, and an outbreak of parvovirus killed numerous puppies at his facility. When the USDA finally suspended his license, Miller posted a handmade sign leading into his property that reads: "Due to USDA overreach, we have been required to close our doors with no notice." Apparently 90 violations wasn't enough of a warning for him.

Meanwhile, at the West Coast Game Park, inspectors actually *did* refer the case to IES for enforcement, but it never reached a hearing. The USDA simply let the facility's license expire—which, as we discussed earlier, does not disqualify you from obtaining a license in the future.

Even if a violator accepts a settlement, the fine can be slashed to nearly nothing. According to the Office of the Inspector General, which did an audit on APHIS back in 2014, the agency had been discounting imposed fines an average of 86 percent, with the highest discount discovered at 96 percent. Imagine being fined

# TRENDS IN ANIMAL SLAUGHTER

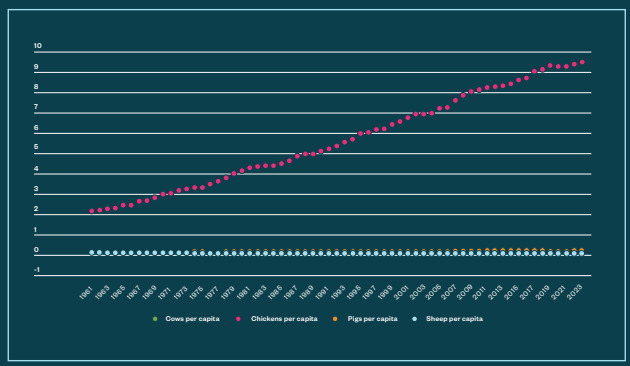
*BY FAUNALYTICS*




For almost all species, the absolute numbers in almost every continent are trending upwards. The exception is for cows, where slaughter is flat in many continents, rising in Asia and Africa, but declining significantly in Europe. Finally, one positive note is that fish slaughter seems to be flat or declining across the world—even in Asia, which has accounted for a high volume of fish slaughter in the past. The clear exception is Africa, where fish slaughter is on a general upward climb, despite a small dip in 2020.

It's easy to see that chickens are by far the most numerously slaughtered land animal, followed by pigs, sheep, and cows. This may seem slightly counterintuitive to the visual representation, because the chicken line is the lowest on the chart. However, because chickens are slaughtered in such high numbers, each unit of measurement counts for 1,000 individuals. If we present the data for small-bodied animals without this adjustment, chickens dominate while all other species lines are proportionally flattened at the bottom of the chart — that's how stark the difference in numbers is:


Concerningly, this trend is not just absolute, but per capita, meaning that more chickens are being eaten per person:




We can see very clearly from the totality of the dataset that animal slaughter as an absolute number continues to rise, and outpace population growth in a concerning way. This is largely driven by the slaughter of small-bodied animals, especially chickens and ducks, whose per capita slaughter has risen steadily since 1960.

# HOW TO TALK TO PEOPLE ABOUT ANIMAL WELFARE

*BY PAX FAUNA*

**Pax Fauna conducted 40 focus groups and interviews with 130 ordinary, meat-eating Americans. The study tested fictional ballot measures ranging from banning slaughterhouses to subsidizing meat alternatives, using long-form news articles and social media-style ads as stimuli.**

**Figuring out how to engage the public is important.** A large number of people say they support animal freedom. In surveys, a surprisingly high number of Americans have agreed with strong animal rights positions such as "all animals should have the same rights as humans" (32%) and "slaughterhouses should be shut down" (47%).

But not at the cost of personal choice. 98% of the same people agreed that "Whether to eat meat or be vegetarian is a personal choice, and nobody has the right to tell me which one they think I should do." And, of course, nearly all of them are making the "personal choice" to keep eating animals. The public knows meat is harmful, and they're buying it anyway.

Yet most of the people we interviewed were surprisingly quick to let us know how conflicted they are about eating slaughtered meat. Many had seen slaughter footage and almost all are aware of the ethical issues. In fact, they admit that they actively "try not to think about it" when buying meat.

**So how do we motivate support?** One major finding from our research: we should make a shift from engaging the public as consumers to engaging them as voters. Rather than asking individuals to go vegan or change their personal consumption habits, the "voter-centric" approach focuses on building support for collective policy solutions and government intervention to accelerate the transition away from animal agriculture. This overcomes the defensiveness and libertarian resistance that emerges when people feel their personal food choices are being attacked, instead positioning them as civic participants who can vote for policies like subsidizing animal-free alternatives or helping farmers transition away from animal agriculture.

Advocates should tell a story of citizens acting collectively through the vote, rather than consumers acting individually through diet change. They should emphasize collective evolution rather than individual consumer change, use relatable messengers, and focus policy demands on making plant-based options more accessible. People look at the world differently depending on what role they are in at any given moment. The values people focus on in their roles as consumers (personal freedom, consumer choice, and autonomy) do not lead them to support the goals of animal advocates. **We can gain broader support by engaging with the public in their role as voters.**

Our research reveals widespread but shallow latent support that advocates must work to make more visible, while recognizing that meaningful change will require sustained movement efforts to overcome public resistance to change itself.

$100,000 for breaking federal law and then only having to pay $4,000 of it. According to PETA Vice President and attorney Delcianna Winders, who discussed the issue during a recent panel at Harvard Law School, "because of the discounting, the penalties are being treated as a 'cost of business.'"

## WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

I grew up in a rural environment where budget constraints affect our everyday lives. So when I started to dig into the systematic failures of this process, I assumed that federal agencies simply lacked the funding to properly enforce the Animal Welfare Act. This idea was reinforced by a 2023 congressional research paper that shows the number of USDA inspectors has been shrinking over the years. In 2021, APHIS also moved from one-year license renewals—which required yearly inspections—to a three-year system, meaning facilities can go nearly three years without a visit. The agency said this would allow them to focus their efforts on high-risk offenders.

All of these things had me truly convinced that enforcement failures were about money—until I discovered APHIS's yearly budget. In 2024, the agency was allocated $4.59 billion for their operations, yet only used $2.74 billion: a mere 59 percent of their total budget. That's better than 2021 and 2022, where they spent even less. (One could argue that the agency spent less due to the pandemic, but shutdowns or not, someone was still responsible for caring for these animals, meaning APHIS was still responsible for regulating them.) Despite this overflow of cash, the number of inspectors on staff with APHIS has been steadily decreasing, from 122 in 2021 to 98 in 2023. Now, we know they aren't seizing

# Q&A | ARE THE OMNIVORES INDEFENSIBLE?

## JOHN SANBONMATSU

**AUTHOR, *THE OMNIVORE'S DECEPTION***

**John Sanbonmatsu is Professor of Philosophy at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. His powerful new book *The Omnivore's Deception: What We Get Wrong about Meat, Animals, and Ourselves* "peels back the myriad layers of myth, falsehoods, and bad faith that keep us eating meat."**

**Q: You have said that "The animal economy today is the greatest system of mass violence and injustice in the history of the world." What do you mean?**

A: The Polish-Jewish jurist Raphael Lemkin defined genocide as the attempt to obliterate a people's or ethnic group's identity by undermining its "biological structure" and "elemental means of existence." By analogy, we as a species are engaged in genocide against all the other animals of the earth—that is, against sensitive beings known to possess intelligence, subjectivity, complex emotions, and a demonstrated vulnerability to trauma. So extreme are the harms we routinely inflict on other animals that we would consider them war crimes were they inflicted on members of our own species. In countless numbers, animals are stabbed or shot or stomped to death, suffocated, gassed, vivisected, burned or boiled alive, poisoned and genetically altered, and otherwise subjected to humiliation, degradation, torture, imprisonment, and extermination. Furthermore, this is occurring on a scale so vast that we have effectively turned the earth itself into our gulag and killing field. By biomass, 96 percent of all mammals, excluding humans, and more than two-thirds of all birds, are our captives, imprisoned in wretched conditions awaiting violent death at our hands. Eighty billion land animals and up to 2.7 trillion marine animals are killed each year in the food system alone; in addition, hundreds of millions of other animals are killed each year in scientific laboratories, in the fur industry, in hunting and sport fishing, etc. This system, supercharged by capitalism, is now the most ecologically destructive force on earth, the main driver of mass species extinction and deforestation, the second leading source of greenhouse gas emissions, and the leading cause of freshwater systems loss and plastics in our seas—up to 86 percent of which is from discarded fishing gear.

None of this violence is necessary, and therefore none of it can be considered morally justified. Studies have shown that humans thrive on a plant-based diet, and that vegans in fact have lower risks of cancer, stroke, cardiovascular disease, and Type 2 diabetes than people who consume animal products. Despite such facts, we continue to organize our species activity, our modes of production, cultural beliefs, and existential identity, around the controlled extermination of our fellow beings. The pervasiveness of this massive evil vitiates any claim we might plausibly make to being "moral" or "rational" beings.

**Q: If what you say is true, how is it that we can be part of the greatest system of mass violence and injustice in the history of the world and not even notice it?**

A: Slavery endured for millennia in part because it was so deeply woven into the fabric of everyday life that no one thought to question it; the very ubiquity of our violence against animals likewise renders it invisible. Capitalism, which obscures the conditions under which commodities are produced, is part of the problem. Because the violence, filth, and suffering entailed in animal production are scrupulously hidden from view, very few people get any true sense of the horrors inflicted on animals in production—the sexual mutilation and rape of animals in reproduction, the use of electric prods and other torture devices to coerce behavior, the trauma experienced by animals as they are killed. The meat, egg, dairy, and fish industries meanwhile spend hundreds of millions of dollars to conform our desires to the needs of the animal system.

But capitalism isn't the only

animals, since local authorities have been stepping in across the nation. We know they aren't employing more inspectors. They have the budget to do more, so why aren't they using it?

One of the primary things the agency could do is hire more inspectors. That's not rocket science when you consider that there are more than *13,000 licensees and registrants* across the United States, all of whom the APHIS is responsible for regulating, using only 98 trained staff. If they were to visit every licensee and registrant just once per year, each inspector would need to complete a new inspection roughly every two days, covering facilities that are often hundreds of miles apart. This isn't even factoring in the re-inspections for facilities with violations.

The issue is, due to the hiring qualifications of the USDA, bringing in more inspectors isn't exactly that easy. Of the 98 inspectors at last count, most were licensed veterinarians, while 33 had bachelor's degrees in biology or science and were specifically trained as animal care evaluators. If those 33 people could be trained to identify welfare issues, why not extend the same training to police officers, animal control staff, or even veterinary technicians, who usually have an associate's degree? By reducing requirements and reserving veterinarians for complex cases, the USDA could drastically expand its inspection force. Not only would this be a better use of funds, it would improve outcomes for animals and reduce public risks.

Aside from the USDA changing their practices, the federal government can also implement additional laws to prevent the suffering of these animals. Currently, advocates have been pushing for The Better Collaboration, Accountability, and Regulatory Enforcement (CARE) for Animals Act, which would improve the ability of the

reason why the totality of the animal system remains hidden from view. If no one sees it, it is also because no one wants to see it. The foundational belief of civilization is that only human life has inherent dignity and value, and that all other animals are worthless inferiors—slaves and tools "meant" to serve our purposes. To question the exploitation of animals, therefore, is to question civilization itself. Hence the anger and ridicule heaped upon vegans and ethical vegetarians. Society must defend itself against a form of self-understanding that would shatter it.

**Q: You are scathing about those who are critical of factory farming but who also think we can redeem meat and consume it ethically. Why?**

A: For decades, critics like Michael Pollan, Barbara Kingsolver, Temple Grandin, and others have been promoting smaller-scale, "pastoral" animal agriculture as the supposedly "sustainable" and "humane" alternative to so-called factory farms. However, their arguments are fallacious and morally corrupt.

On the one hand, we can all agree that industrialized animal agriculture devastates the environment, incubates deadly zoonotic diseases like bird flu, breeds antibiotic-resistant superbugs, and causes horrific suffering to the billions of animals raised in intensive confinement. On the other hand, smaller-scale and organic animal agriculture is neither sustainable nor ethically defensible. Raising animals on factory farms is unquestionably a destructive and inefficient way to produce food for human consumption; but grazing animals on pasture on smaller farms is even less efficient, and requires even more resources. Simply, there isn't enough land or fresh water resources on the earth to scale up regenerative animal agriculture to the point where it could provide 8-10 billion human beings with an unending supply of meat, eggs, and dairy.

Ultimately, the problem isn't "factory farming," as such, but rather the underlying relation of violence and domination that serves as the precondition for every form of animal exploitation, at whatever scale. Once we decide to treat animals as mere "things" to be exploited and killed for human purposes—rather than as individuals with their own legitimate interests and needs—we've removed any meaningful moral constraint against harming them. And under capitalist relations, this means that animals will always be exploited at scale, meaning in mass industrialized conditions. The vaunted distinction between "ethical" and "unethical" forms of animal agriculture is therefore a distinction without a difference. "Enlightened" omnivorism, the attempt by Pollan and many others to resolve the "legitimation crisis" of the animal system by recuperating the narrative of meat as a benign commodity, is an intellectually shoddy and disingenuous work-around to the problems inherent in human supremacism.

**Q: You note that while the animal rights movement has been successful in introducing some policies to restrict certain kinds of animal cruelty "it has not had the slightest impact on the public's view that killing and eating animals is 'natural' and therefore right." Why has it been so ineffective, and do you believe such a moral transformation can ever occur?**

A: Philosophical objections to human domination and killing of other animals for food first emerged nearly 3,000 years ago, yet our treatment of animals today is the worst it's ever been. While the animal advocacy movement has achieved some reforms in recent decades—like banning elephants from most circuses, or reducing consumer demand for fur—it has failed to dislodge human supremacism as the governing ideological principle of our life as a species. As Marx and Engels observed in *The German Ideology*, the ruling ideas in any epoch are the ideas of the ruling class: thus it is with our own species, the de facto ruling class of the earth. To justify the total force and control we wield over the other animals, we have developed a variety of bad faith rationales to keep us from questioning our collective material stake in maintaining the status quo. The most pervasive and destructive of these rationales is simply the idea that it is "natural" for us to dominate other beings. In fact, though, there is nothing "natural" about raising billions of animals in confinement, sexually mutilating them, shooting them in the head with a captive bolt gun, and cutting them up into pieces to sell at the supermarket. Hunting, fishing, and animal agriculture are not "natural," either; they are cultural practices we choose to engage in.

It is clear that for animal advocacy to succeed, the movement will have to rethink its strategic approach. While the movement has done a good job spotlighting particular features of the animal system, it has failed to reveal to the public the true nature of the animal system—namely, that it constitutes a totalitarian system of extermination. The root of the problem facing animals isn't "factory farms" or "suffering," it's human supremacism, capitalist exploitation of nature, and mass violence. What the public urgently needs to know is that there is no "humane" or "ethical" way to exploit and brutalize other sensitive beings. Because the animal system imperils our own existence, too, animal advocates meanwhile need to forge alliances with other anti-capitalist social movements, with the aim of developing a single movement capable of acting in defense of social justice, animals, democracy, and the living earth.

Department of Justice to intervene in cases involving welfare violations. This bill would give the DOJ the proper tools to collaborate with the USDA to enforce the Animal Welfare Act to address the repeat offenders. Many lawmakers see the need and agree that this bill should be passed, with 83 co-sponsors in the House.

State legislators can prevent cruelty by passing laws that stop private ownership. Currently, there are only 20 states with comprehensive bans on the private ownership of exotic pets and dangerous animals—most of which have some form of an exclusion for USDA-licensed facilities. In recent years, however, 12 states have enacted laws surrounding the use of exotic animals in traveling performances that either restrict the handling methods they may use, restrict the type of animal used, or prohibit it entirely. This is a massive win for animals owned by circuses and performers, and should be repeated nationwide.

Lastly, the public can personally take action to prevent more animals from suffering. First, I highly encourage you to follow any bills introduced into your state's legislation regarding animals and submit your thoughts as a public comment, or simply reach out to your district's legislators and encourage them to support the bill. I would also encourage writing to your federal legislative members, encouraging them to push for the Better CARE for Animals Act. Hearing from constituents is crucial when it comes to legislative matters.

Finally, don't support circuses who still use animals in their performances. It is also important to do research prior to visiting a zoo—check to see if they are accredited with either the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries or the American Zoological Association. In the event that you do accidentally end up at facility where you see something that isn't right, snap some pictures (if it's safe to do so) and file a report on the APHIS website. I also highly recommend submitting any concerns to your local law enforcement agencies, as well as your state's agricultural department to ensure all agencies are aware. You can also view all inspection reports and enforcement actions for the last ten years on the APHIS website utilizing their Animal Care Public Search Tool to see if inspectors have made any comments regarding a specific facility.

Don't be afraid to speak up if you see something harmful, because your thoughts and opinions can sway others. Remember: great things are achieved by a series of small actions that are brought together and repeated consistently.

When I first discovered the inspection reports for the West Coast Game Park Safari—a facility located right in my hometown—I feared that its operators would never face justice, and that its animals would continue to suffer. I honestly don't think I have ever been so happy to be wrong before. I'm also happy that I never stopped asking questions and pushing for answers. Even after the seizure, I have continued to push—to find out why the USDA didn't step in earlier, and how we can make sure atrocities like the ones that occurred there will never be repeated. It's 2025, and the days where we abuse animals for entertainment should have been gone for many, many years.

# Q&A

## THE POWER OF LOGIC

SEB ALEX
MIDDLE EAST VEGAN SOCIETY

**Seb Alex is an animal rights activist, lecturer, photojournalist and author who runs the Middle East Vegan Society and has given animal rights advocacy workshops to over 1300+ activists across Europe, the Middle East and Australia. He is the author of the book *When Logic and Animal Rights Meet*, which explains how logical fallacies are used to justify animal exploitation and how you can detect them.**

**Q: Why do you recommend animal advocates study logic and argumentation?**

A: The reason why I believe it's important for people to understand how *arguments* work in order to discuss animal welfare issues intelligently is because I strongly believe that we have reason, logic and ethical consistency on our "side" of the argument. Although emotional approaches also work with some people, an appeal to emotion isn't always as powerful as a simple logic-based argument that someone can't build an answer against. Ultimately, the cause we fight for is one where the suffering or exploitation of other animals depends on how well we fight for them. Given the importance of this issue, I believe every advocate should understand how to build strong arguments for animal rights.

**Q: What's an example of the kind of logical thinking you're talking about?**

A: A simple example is the "naming the trait" question that we can ask a person, which says: "Can you name the trait that is true of other animals that if true of humans would justify treating humans the way we treat other animals?" In other words, what is the morally relevant trait that these animals we exploit and/or kill don't possess? How can we justify doing what we do when in all *morally relevant* ways, we are similar to them?

The question aims to test their logical consistency, by extending the notions that human rights are based on to other animals. This is because,

despite being very different from each other, in so many different ways such as looks, skin color, intelligence, etc., we have agreed that all humans are equal due to the fact that none of these traits are morally relevant. The same applies to other animals.

There are many arguments for animal rights. Advocates should be careful to not use logical fallacies such as appealing to nature in order to try to make our case for animal rights.


EXTINCTION
THE BOARD GAME!!
BIRTH
CONGRATULATIONS!! YOU WERE JUST BORN AND ARE THE LAST OF YOUR SPECIES. GOODLUCK SURVIVING THE HUMANS!
YOU WERE IN A DAVID ATTENBOROUGH FILM! MAYBE NOW SOMEONE WILL ACTUALLY CARE...
GREAT NEWS! NEW LEGISLATION PASSED. YOU'RE NOW PROTECTED. MOVE AHEAD 4 SPACES!
BADLUCK
JUST YOUR LUCK, A RECENT OIL SPILL HAS CAUSED 4.9 MILLION GALLO OF OIL TO FILL LITTLE CORNE THE OCEAN. YO ALL YOUR F HAVE D
CLIMATE CHANGE IS A "HOAX". BUT YOU DIED IN THE WARMED OCEAN ANYWAYS.
SLASH & BURN! YOUR RAINFOREST HOME IS GONE AND ALL YOUR FRIENDS ARE DEAD.
INSTANT DEATH.
OH NO! YOU GOT CAUGHT IN A FLOATING PLASTIC BAG AND DROWNED. SORRY.
SAFARI! YOU WERE KILLED FOR SPORT. BUMMER.
SADLY THAT LEGISLATION WAS REVOKED. MOVE BACK 2 SPACES.
REVOKED!
BADLUCK
? MYSTERY ?
BAD NEWS. YOUR PROTECTED LANDS HAVE JUST BEEN OPENED FOR MINING
DEATH
DONT WORRY. ITS INNEVITABLE. WE ALL DIE SOMEDAY. UNFORTUNATELY, YOU
THE LAST OF YOUR
WITH THAT, ALL YOUR
FROM THE
RETURN.


BARKS FOR MARX
ANIMALS AND THE LEFT
BY: TROY VETTESE

On New Year's Eve in 1995, French president François Mitterrand dined upon the cruel apex of French cuisine—foie gras, three dozen oysters, and a capon. But a smaller bird, the ortolan bunting, was the *pièce de résistance* of the dying man's last meal. The sparrow-sized *Emberiza hortulana* are known as the "soul of France" and are easy to recognize with their olive-grey heads and distinctive yellow eye-rings. Poachers use glue and nets to catch the tiny creatures as they rest in trees after an exhausting migratory flight over the Mediterranean. Sold to restaurants, the captives are blinded or immured, as darkness triggers instinctual gorging. After adding a few grams to their minute frames, they are taken, still alive, and plunged in brandy to drown, then marinate, before being plucked and roasted. Connoisseurs speak rapturously of juices bursting from ruptured organs, of how small bones lacerate the inside of one's mouth, heightening one's sense of taste. Tradition demands draping one's head with a napkin to shield this gastronomic atrocity from God's eyes. Not sated by a single serving, Mitterrand ate two *ortolan rôti* at his morbid banquet.

It is hard to remember the jubilation following Mitterrand's victory in 1981—where he became the first socialist president in half a century—and the radical economic program he implemented during his first two years in office, because of the thermidor chill of his later administration and consistent callousness to environmental issues. Any hopes of a green-left alliance sank with the *Rainbow Warrior*, the Greenpeace ship bombed by French intelligence operatives in 1985.

Mitterand's last meal, a symbolic climax of a long-standing contempt toward nature, leads one to ask: how could such an influential politician of the 20th-century European left be a sadistic, vain grotesquerie, when his socialist forebears two centuries prior dreamt of utopias where both humans and animals could be free? It was once natural to ask: why pursue the liberation of just one species if only to raise them as tyrants over all the others? Animal liberation was once a key component of radical politics, but for much of the 20th and 21st centuries it has languished as the "orphan of the left." For Mitterrand, animals and socialism were only unified in his stomach.

One might assume that animal liberation has returned to the center of radical thought given the flowering of "ecosocialism" over the past decade. In 2016 and 2018, green Marxists Andreas Malm and Kohei Saito respectively garnered the coveted Deutscher Prize—the left's Pulitzer—and their monographs and manifestos have sold by the hundreds of thousands. The efforts of academic ecosocialists have been reinforced by prominent left-wing journalists, notably Naomi Klein, who shepherded shibboleths such as the "Green New Deal" into mainstream discussions. The contrast between today and the bad old 1990s is profound. Back then, the doyen of Marxist orthodoxy, David Harvey, could unabashedly cite neoliberal dross to buttress his assertion that the "doomsday scenario of the environmentalists is farfetched and improbable," while Marxism's premier journal, *New Left Review*, published drivel questioning the "supposed greenhouse effect." Before the last decade or so, there were some ecosocialists, but they wrote as individuals—Wolfgang Harich, André Gorz, Ted Benton, James O'Connor, Mike Davis, and so on. Now the tendency has become a collective endeavor at the center of debates. This is all well and good. *But where are the animals in ecosocialism?*

Here is the intellectual mystery that needs to be explained: why do ecosocialists neglect or outright reject animal liberation? (There are a few exceptions, including Kenneth Fish, Astra Taylor, and Ted Benton, but not many more.) It is astonishing that Verso, the left's leading publisher, can churn out an endless stream of similar-sounding books on climate change (usually with some variation of "burning" or "fire" in their titles), but have published *nothing* on the biodiversity crisis and just a smattering on animal rights. (Revealingly, the recent book *On Extinction* focuses only on *human* extinction.) Max Ajl and Rob Wallace sound much like spokesmen for a ranchers' association when they implausibly claim methane emissions from North America's livestock industry were comparable to the historic bison population, and thus are not worth worrying about. In her review of George Monbiot's *Regenesis* in *New Left Review*, Harriet Friedmann poses the "question of manure" because she cannot imagine farming without livestock, then laments "veganism, even more than conservation" becoming the book's "driving force," as if that disqualifies it. The ecosocialists' flagship magazine, *Monthly Review*, can publish a critique on conservation for being inherently "colonial" (deploying the *Kampfbegriff* 17 times in one essay) without displaying any interest in what *socialist* conservation might look like. In *This Changes Everything*, Naomi Klein eagerly concurs that "the right is right" when conservatives warn against climate change being a "green Trojan Horse" for the left, but in *On Fire* she rejects Donald Trump's extrapolation from the logic of the Green New Deal that "you're not allowed to own cows anymore" as a "smear." To adapt the well-known quote from Fredric Jameson, it seems that socialists find it easier to imagine the end of the world than an end to hamburgers.

Such an omission is strange not only because socialists pride themselves on practicing the "ruthless criticism of everything existing," but because they are descended from a radical tradition overstuffed with vegetarians two centuries ago. Animal liberation was debated and, often, pursued by revolutionary liberals, Romantic poets, and working-class Christians, the troika that would eventually birth the socialist movement. Even after Marxism's ascendance in the latter half of the 19th century, a few illustrious herbivores remained within the left's ranks, including George Bernard Shaw, Charlotte Despard, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Henry Salt, Franz Kafka, and Edward Carpenter. How did a coalition of poets, Jacobins, and utopians birth as its descendants ghoulish gluttons and *bien pensant* theorists who refuse to speak up for another species? When neglect is enough to doom an animal—the ortolan bunting is still heavily poached and will likely perish within a quarter century—then the ethical gap between gorging on songbirds and indifference to their fate is narrow. What happened to the soul of socialism?

For nearly a century, between the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in 1755 and the collapse of Robert Owen's communal movement in 1845, animal liberation was alongside gender equality, atheism, and abolishing private property among the highest summits of utopian desire. The distant goal of animal liberation and its immediate practice of vegetarianism not only distinguished early socialists from those to their right, but also acted as an adhesive binding various groupuscules of early socialism into a new, cohesive ideology. As we

shall see, the animal question would be precisely the point where Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels snapped the socialist movement into the camps of "scientific socialists"—as the Marxists arrogantly called themselves—and their superannuated "utopian" predecessors. Once Marxists became the dominant faction within socialism in the late 19th century, the prominent aspiration of animal liberation would fade and be forgotten, except when it would be revived occasionally as an object of ridicule.

Just as Rousseau is a forefather of European socialism without quite being a socialist, he was seen by his contemporaries as a proselytiser of vegetarianism while only dabbling in it himself. He did, however, often discuss animals and meat in his many works. In the *Discourse*, he argued if one heeded the "inner compulsion of compassion" then one would "never do harm to another man or even to another sentient being." In *Émile*, he argued that carnivory changed people's behavior, and that "great eaters of meat are in general cruel and more ferocious than other men." As someone who advocated for simplicity in food and other facets of life, he had nothing but contempt for gluttons, who had a "vice of souls that have no solidity" and are "brought into the world but to devour." It is not hard to imagine what he would have thought of Mitterrand.

Rousseau would inspire many imitators, including British radicals across the Channel. The Scottish vegetarian John Oswald not only admired Rousseau but was inspired by Indian dietary practices during his military service on the subcontinent. Disgusted by colonial violence, he abandoned the British army and rushed to Paris after the outbreak of the revolution to join the Jacobin Club. He soon became a military advisor, an admirer of the guillotine, and an advocate for animal liberation. Amidst the turmoil of the early 1790s, he somehow found the time to pen *The Cry of Nature*, arguably the first modern pamphlet dedicated to freeing fellow creatures. Oswald's example inspired other radical liberals, such as Joseph Ritson, who was published by the same press as Thomas Paine. Ritson's *Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food as a Moral Duty* was soon accompanied by other vegetarian propaganda, such as Thomas Frank Newton's inquiry into humanity's natural diet in *Return to Nature*. Newton met Percy Bysshe Shelley at the home of William Godwin (another radical liberal and occasional herbivore like Rousseau) to feast on vegetarian fare and radical ideas. Shelley drew on Newton and Ritson when composing his long poem *Queen Mab*, whose influences are especially evident in the section "A Vindication of Natural Diet." For Shelley, socialism was inseparable from vegetarianism, hence his denunciation of "the monopolising eater of animal flesh" for "devouring an acre at a meal." *Queen Mab* became a tract beloved by working-class radicals, such as the Chartists fighting for universal male suffrage in the mid-19th century. Indeed, George Bernard Shaw recalled being told in his youth by an elderly activist that *Queen Mab* was known as the "Chartists' Bible."

Christians belonging to "dissenting" denominations (i.e., not the Church of England) were more receptive to the swift undercurrent in their religion that pulled them towards socialism and vegetarianism. (This ancient tendency has emerged sporadically since the beginning of Christianity, such as the first-century Gnostics and the mediaeval Cathars, who were vegetarian anti-establishmentarians *par excellence*). The founder of the conservative Methodist church, John Wesley, was vegetarian. Thomas Tyron, a 17th-century proponent of animal liberation and influence on later writers like Ritson, was Anabaptist. The most important vegetarian Christian for our narrative, however, was William Cowherd, who founded his own church in Salford in 1809 to practice vegetarianism without interference from skeptical carnivores higher up in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Cowherd organized educational programs, communal meals, and scientific training for his working-class congregants, contributing to what one historian called the era's "proletarian enlightenment." One Cowherdite, Joseph Brotherton, was active within the labor movement and organized donations for victims of the Peterloo massacre in 1819, when soldiers attacked working-class demonstrators demanding suffrage. After parliamentary reform in 1832, Brotherton was elected as Salford's first Member of Parliament. Robert Owen, the entrepreneur and utopian socialist, was a Methodist before adopting spiritualism in his defeated old age. He was not vegetarian, but many in his movement were, including William Thompson, his right-hand man and the group's leading economic theorist.

For these three groups—radical liberals, Romantics, and working-class Christians—vegetarianism was a corollary of their interest in a profound question: what were humans like before civilization? Whether they were atheist or religious, they all believed that civilization had bred squalor, hierarchy, ill health, and alienation from nature. The goal of socialism then was to restore humanity to its natural state, even if people could not actually return to the Garden of Eden or to a life of hunting and gathering. Thus, a meatless diet, holding property in common, and allowing men and women to relate to each other without shame or domination were practical ways to create an earthly paradise. Vegetarianism was a crucial practice to realize this endeavor. Cowherd composed vegetarian hymns for his congregants ("Ours is the food that Eden knew / Ere our first parents fell"), while Rousseau considered it "proof that the taste for meat is not natural to Man is the indifference children have to such food and their preference for all kinds of the vegetarian vittles."

Shelley and fellow Romantics interpreted the myth of Prometheus as a description of the ancient shift from a herbivorous to carnivorous diet after the adoption of "fire to culinary purposes" which made flesh palatable ("screening from his disgust the horrors of the shambles"). Few of these vegetarian radicals were solipsistically concerned with health alone. Rather, they were moved by the more profound injury of our separation from fellow creatures. In *Queen Mab*, Shelley looked forward to when:

> *No longer now the winged inhabitants,*
> *That in the woods their sweet lives sign away,*
> *Flee from the form of man; but gather round,*
> *And prune their sunny feathers on the hands*
> *Which little children stretch in friendly sport*
> *Towards these dreadless partners of their play.*
> *All things are void of terror: man has lost*
> *His terrible prerogative, and stands*
> *An equal amidst equals*

Compared to utopian socialism's verdant intellectual history that teems with animals, Marx and Engels' collected works offer only a few piffling fragments that could be cobbled together as environmental frameworks. The fruit of such scholarship, Saito's "degrowth communism" and John Bellamy Foster's "metabolic rift," has licensed Marxists to finally care about environmental

issues, and thus has its merits. Yet, if the limiting factor in Marxists' interest in nature is the concern Marx himself showed about soil fertility, then such scholarship offers quite arid ground for a new ecosocialism. Nowhere in Marx's writings can one find any interest in fostering a new socialist subject who could relate to nature differently, let alone someone akin to Shelley's edenic human whom animals would not fear. Instead of trying to find validation for ecosocialism solely in Marxism, it is worthwhile to examine the utopian socialist tradition for inspiration and to also see why Marx and Engels discarded the long-held aim of animal liberation as they devised a new socialist lineage. Animals were once at the center of socialist thought, then they suddenly disappeared.

Explaining this rupture requires attending to Marxism's contradictory place in the history of the left as both an heir of utopian socialism and its usurper. To different degrees, both Marx and Engels praised utopian socialists, drew on many of their goals and concepts, and participated in their organizations. The widespread misconception on the left today that they simply dismissed utopian socialism fails to capture their complicated engagement with it.

Marx and Engels' deference to utopian socialism—especially Owenism—stemmed from that tradition's stature as the left's towering, then suddenly tottering, edifice during their youth. Engels first encountered the left in 1842 when he attended a lecture at an Owenite Hall of Science, a massive building in central Manchester that could accommodate an audience of three thousand. Soon thereafter, he began writing for the *Northern Star*, an Owenite newspaper, which was part of a publishing empire able to print two million pamphlets a year. While a young Marx was immersed in the political triangle between Cologne, Brussels, and Paris, and thus was far from Owenism's heartlands in northern England, he felt obligated to attend Owen's 80th birthday celebration in 1851. He reported back to Engels that "the old man was ironical and endearing." Even in the polemical *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels asserted how "proud" he was to have "descended" from Owen and other utopian socialists. Marx not only considered Shelley to belong to the "advanced guard of Socialism," but angrily defended utopian socialists from the "coarse insults" of his rival Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Marx and Engels' proximity to the utopian socialists was not only physical but also intellectual, as they borrowed several key concepts, such as the goal of overcoming the division of town and country, as well as imagining socialist governance in terms of the "withering" of the state.

Marxism would come to surpass utopian socialism, not because of the broadsides fired by the Rheinlanders but from the utopians own charming admixture of hubris and naïveté. There were many intentional communities in the first half of the 19th century in North and South America, the Caribbean, and Europe. The willingness of utopian socialists to try to practice and realize their visions was simultaneously a strength and weakness of the movement. Robert Owen bought 30,000 acres from an existing religious community in Indiana for one experimental community, renamed New Harmony. Its collapse in 1828 cost the wealthy entrepreneur four-fifths of his fortune. When Owen's last attempt to organize a socialist community, Queenwood, collapsed in 1845, his movement was dragged down with it. Through this yawning gap Marx and Engels stepped in, determined not to repeat the mistakes of the old left. Commentators over the years have suggested various differences between utopian and scientific socialists (e.g., writing "blueprints" and "recipes for the cookshops of the future"), but they have overlooked the most profound point of contention: their opposing conceptions of the human, which in turn affected how each group approached the animal question.

The differences between utopian socialists and Marxists were ultimately rooted in contrasting conceptions of the human animal. Owen and his fellow utopian socialists assumed that human nature could be understood through study and modified through education because its essence was largely static and knowable. The route to such comprehension could, depending on the kind of utopian socialist, lead through theology, sociology, or anthropology, but they believed that once the facade of civilization was stripped away then our species' original nature could be discerned in the "savage" or denizen of Eden. Already by the 18th century, early socialists believed that they knew enough about human nature to imagine the contours of a new society. These speculations tended to be rustically Rousseauan: simple clothing, simple food, and simple pleasures. The utopian socialists agreed that, before civilization, humans shared the Earth in common, without any hierarchy (apart, perhaps, from one based on age) predicated on class or gender. Some socialist utopias had some modern conveniences, such as John Adolphus Etzler's fantastical "naval automaton" powered by the tides or the "force barges" of William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, but in the words of one historian, the future would in socialism would be "a bit dull." Human desires could be known and satisfied: hence the energetic writing of extremely detailed and largely static utopias.

Notably, the utopian socialists' conception of the human offered little obstacle between *Homo sapiens* and other species. Rousseau once argued that "every animal has ideas since it has senses [...] there is more difference between this man and that man than between this man and that animal." Once one began to imagine liberation for our species there seemed little reason to stop there, which is why animal liberation appears so early and often in early socialist works. Admittedly, the utopian socialists lacked any understanding of ecology, and therefore the aim was not wilderness but a garden, preferably one where all the animals enjoyed harmonious relations amongst themselves too. In *Herland*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopia without men, socialist Amazons selectively bred cats so that they lost their instinct to kill birds, while the beautiful forest surrounding Herland had been denuded of predators. One can find similar examples in other utopian socialist tracts; in some speculations carnivorous animals were replaced with better, benign creatures, such as Charles Fourier's "anti-lion." From a contemporary ecosocialist perspective that focuses on the catastrophe of the Sixth Extinction and the potential of rewilding (especially through reintroducing apex predators), clearly one cannot borrow wholecloth from the utopian socialist tradition.

For Marx, however, humanity's essence or "species-being" was defined by its historicity, consciousness, and unpredictability. In these ways, Marx distinguished humans from a typical animal that was merely "one with its life activity." For him, animals were unthinking, unchanging, and defined by certain behaviours and organs, while humans thought before they acted, and could become a uniquely "universal" species by treating "all nature [as humanity's] inorganic body"—that is, as a set of external, mutable organs in the

form of tools and infrastructure. This process was, first, historical because human nature would change as people changed their environment and, second, unpredictably dynamic. Thus, detailed utopian blueprints were moot because future desires and abilities would be permanently in flux. This process of changing one's species-being was a conscious process, making humanity a species uniquely able to direct its own development.

Unlike the utopian socialists, Marx drew not on theology or anthropology, but rather a philosophy of history that convinced him that the "elements of the new society" could be glimpsed in the old and would hint at future developments. As humans were dynamic by nature, Marx and Engels reasoned, our species would change even faster under socialism. Engels also projected Marx's philosophy of history backwards to argue that humans guided their own evolution through tool-use (increasing the dexterity of our hands) and carnivory (which gave the brain a "far richer flow of the materials necessary for its nourishment and development.") To emphasize his disagreement with earlier edenic socialists, Engels declared that "with all due respect to the vegetarians, man did not come into existence without a meat diet." In this conception, humanity was not only different from all other species in that it consciously creates itself, but to realize its species-being it must become a universal animal by redirecting all of nature to its ends. It is not hard to see how this conception of the human would come to undergird Marxism's nigh indestructible anti-animal bigotry.

The effects of the Marxist view of human nature were detectable soon enough. Whereas vegetarianism remained present in the non-Marxist socialist lineages remaining after the collapse of Owenism in 1845, there have been remarkably few Marxist vegetarians. Shaw saw the new split as "those who want to sit amongst the daisies and those who organize the dockworkers." One of Marx's early champions in Britain, H.M. Hyndman, visited one such vegetarian socialist (Henry Salt) and wrote to another (Shaw) to complain:

> *I do not want the movement to become a depository of old cranks, humanitarians, vegetarians, anti-vivisectionists and anti-vaccinationists, arty-crafties and all the rest of them. We are scientific socialists and have no room for sentimentalists.*

During the Russian Civil War, Leon Trotsky summoned the ghosts of the old left to dismiss criticism of his ruthless methods ("Kantian-priestly and vegetarian-Quaker prattle"). In the 1930s, Marxist archaeologist Gordon Childe drew on Marx and Engels' conception of the human to structure his influential history of the Neolithic Era, in the aptly titled *Man Makes Himself*. Whereas animals evolve to become "better adapted for survival, more fitted to obtain food and shelter," he wrote, "human history reveals man creating new industries and new economies that have furthered the increase of human species and thereby vindicated its enhanced fitness." It is unsurprising that the myth of "man the hunter" was coined by another Marxist anthropologist in the 1960s.

These misconceptions seem to have endured and proliferated even after Marxism's decline in the 1990s, becoming common sense within the broader communities of academic science (e.g., the "expensive tissue hypothesis") and popular culture (e.g., the

# Q&A | ANIMALS AND THE MEDIA | ANA BRADLEY

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SENTIENT MEDIA**

**Ana Bradley is the Executive Director of Sentient Media, the only nonprofit, nonpartisan outlet in the U.S. dedicated to covering the wide ranging impacts of factory farming on everything from rural communities to animal welfare.**

**Q: What do you think the gaps in mainstream reporting on animals are?**

**A:** Animals are almost entirely absent in mainstream media. Which is kind of bizarre when you think about how many there are on the planet—over 80 billion land animals are raised for food every year, so they far outnumber us, but how they live and die is largely unknown and underreported. But our vision, and what we are working toward, is a new public discourse—from a news ecosystem where factory farming is ignored or presented uncritically to one where the glaring truths about factory farming are finally confronted with clarity. And we appreciate all the outlets, like CA, that are dedicating significant space to covering this topic. I also feel that, at least over my years leading Sentient, it seems that people are becoming more interested in learning about the realities of factory farming. Our reach and audience have grown significantly. I think people naturally have an appetite for knowledge and crave clarity.

Factory farming is truly one of the most damaging systems on the planet, yet most of us have no idea.

This invisibility isn't accidental. The industrial animal agriculture industry has spent decades shaping the narrative and funding misinformation campaigns. As a result, media coverage often leaves out critical information.

**Q: Tell us about some of the important stories Sentient has covered.**

**A:** Right now, I'm super excited by our Iowa coverage. Across the Midwest, the continued rise of factory farming is destroying rural communities, polluting waterways and devastating habitats. Here, the people are politically motivated and though disparate in their motivations and up against powerful lobbies, are united by

manospheric "lion diet"). This Marxist view of human nature has even influenced the conception of the Anthropocene. In a prominent article belonging to that oeuvre, bourgeois environmental historians and Earth-system scientists claim that "the shift from a primarily vegetarian diet to an omnivorous diet triggered a fundamental shift in the physical and mental capabilities of early humans." Anthropoid egotism likely undergirds contemporary ecosocialists' focus overwhelmingly on climate change because *this* crisis imperils humans, while factory farming and biodiversity loss matter only for animals. There are, of course, self-interested reasons to worry about such matters—zoonotic pandemics such as SARS-CoV-2 or avian flu spring from razed rainforests, poaching, and the breadth of animal husbandry from the pastoral to hyper-industrial. A more profound reason to care about animal liberation is for the soul of socialism. When socialists argue for omnivory, they unconsciously adopt a conservative rhetoric that appeals to tradition, status quo, pseudo-science, and *vae victis*. One wonders if ecosocialists today fear the ridicule of their comrades for being sentimental cranks, for wanting to sit amongst the daisies.

Utopian socialists questioned civilization and imagined socialism as a way to create a new society allowing us to live in a way more fitting to our nature. Marxists, by contrast, do not engage in a civilizational critique. Rather, they want to accelerate and deepen the pace of civilization by realizing our species-being as the universal entity infusing the planet with our consciousness, to fully de-animalize ourselves. Their faith that the new society is being created in utero within the old ironically robs us of our ability to consciously deliberate what kind of creature we want to be, how we want to relate to each other, and how we should relate to the rest of nature. Mitterrand was the paragon of *too much civilization*, of when a surfeit of sophistication becomes worse than barbarism. Decades later, most Marxists seem unable to perceive the horror latent in their vision of communism, of humanity liberated from capital only to enslave the countless co-inhabitants of our planet.

A new ecosocialism could keep within its theoretical panoply a Marxist critique of political economy, but abjure its nightmarish human-chauvinism. It is bizarre that Marx, the ardent materialist, became an idealist—that is, holding the belief that ideas rather than material conditions drive history—only when he wanted to elevate the "conscious" human over the unthinking animal. "What distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees," he claimed in *Capital*, "is that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality." One could quibble with Marx's grasp of archeology, ethology, and evolutionary biology, but what matters more is that the utopian socialist conception of the human and its corollary of animal liberation is more useful for us now in this era of environmental catastrophe.

Of course, we cannot return to our edenic origins. The hunter-gatherer idyll was only feasible when we numbered four million some 10,000 years ago, not our 8 billion today. However, utopian socialism *is* more feasible than Marxism because it imagines a post-capitalist society that does not depend on completely dominating nature, implementing full automation, and somehow instituting a complex, libertarian social order at a global scale. Marxists

the fundamental need for (and right to) clean water.

For the last few months, Sentient's Nina Elkadi has been reporting on the ground and building relationships with frontline communities, organizers and local newsrooms. The stories we're uncovering in Iowa offer a unique insight into how residents are organizing to fight factory farms on the local level, a message that resonates nationally.

I'll give you an example, one of Nina's recent investigations went kind of viral: "At an Iowa Pork Plant, Piles of Dead Pigs and Wafting Sulphur Dioxide." This story is wild. Essentially, an ex-employee of Seaboard Triumph came forward to share footage and his experience working at the plant. As an employee, he witnessed what appeared to be untreated waste (think feces, guts, animal parts, etc) flowing directly into a drain. He filed a report with the EPA, which allowed us to get in contact with him to help him share his story and video footage. We released the footage on social media, where it quickly gained over 1M views across YouTube, TikTok and Instagram (seems people love to watch waste going down drains?) But excitingly, the comments are so on point and mainly from local people in Iowa expressing disgust and discussing what can be done.

**Q: Sentient includes a vertical specifically for climate. Why?**

A: One-third of greenhouse gas emissions come from food production, most of which is meat, yet 74 percent of people say cutting back on meat would have little or no impact on climate change; the opposite is true.

We have a crucial problem around awareness here and it's the responsibility of the media to address this. A couple of years ago, we released a report in collaboration with Faunalytics that revealed how 93 percent of mainstream media coverage of climate change in the U.S. ignores meat.

**Q: Same with "health." Tell us more about the impact of our food system on our health and the health of workers.**

A: The way we produce food today is definitely a public health hazard, from the unnatural conditions for the animals, which can lead to disease outbreaks, to the dangerous job of meat processing (the amount of stories about people falling into grinders is disturbing), to the increasing antibiotic resistance.

But one area we've been reporting on more and more is the impact of factory farming on clean water. As an example, in Iowa, residents and advocates have been pressing for more research into the role industrial agriculture plays in Iowa's high cancer rates. Pollution from factory farming includes both pesticides and fertilizers, including synthetic and animal manure. The state has about 124 million farm animals at any given time, producing more manure than anywhere else in the country. Spills are frequent—nearly 180 in the last decade—and they've killed close to 2 million fish. Just one spill this year wiped out over 100,000.

And it's not just the spills. Even when manure doesn't overflow into rivers, it can still pose a real threat. When waste from factory farms seeps into water systems and then gets treated with chlorine, it can create toxic byproducts called trihalomethanes. These chemicals have been linked to an increased risk of cancer, problems with the liver and kidneys and risks for pregnant women and infants. Right now, they're showing up in drinking water at levels considered unsafe for around 122 million Americans. So the impact of factory farming on water isn't only about pollution and fish kills—it's about people's health every time they turn on the tap.

somehow still believe that such a society could spontaneously emerge after a revolution and thus not require any discussion on how it would function beforehand. The utopian striving toward Eden while not being able to return creates a different relationship to history, of a thoughtful reflection on our past and animality without degrading into reactionary nostalgia or adhering to a meaningless acceleration into the future. A utopian socialist conception of the human opens up the rigid divide between us and other animals, reminding us that liberation means creating the conditions for us to return to our natural selves.

This goal never completely disappeared on the left. A marginal stream of thought has long meandered slowly and quietly away from the mighty river of anthropocentric Marxism. Theodor Adorno despised the way the "image of the unrestricted, energetic, creative human being has been infiltrated by the commodity fetishism" and instead yearned for a society where one could live "*rien faire comme une bête* [doing nothing, like an animal], lying on the water and look peacefully into the heavens." Becoming animals again would include meaningful work, a restored biosphere, harmonious relations with other creatures, and plenty of time for music, love-making, art, and doing nothing at all. It may sound utopian for humans to become beasts again, but is it not more unrealistic to stretch human nature to its breaking point by keeping pace with the inhuman force of capital? Is it not more unrealistic to think we humans are more akin to capital in its insatiable movement than our fellow lazy animals? In *Capital*, Marx described the proletariat stripped of both its obligations and means of subsistence as *Vogelfrei* ("free as a bird"), without recalling how the word used to connote peasant freedom in the Middle Ages. As socialists, we cannot just yearn for the lost golden age, but seek new ways to combine the liberties of the past with the potential of the present to create a future that transcends both. We must strive to be free as birds once again—and ensure such freedom for birds too. ✣

# Q&A

## WHERE SHOULD YOU DONATE?

## STIEN VAN DER PLOEG

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ANIMAL CHARITY EVALUATORS**

**Stien van der Ploeg is the executive director of Animal Charity Evaluators, an organization that examines animal welfare charities to figure out which ones successfully help animals the most.**

**Q: People who want to donate money to help a cause may be hesitant because they wonder whether their money is actually going to make any difference. The "nonprofit industrial complex" is known for having many organizations that are bloated, ineffective, and self-perpetuating. Your job is to examine charities to find out whether they're really helping animals or not. So how can people know whether their dollars are making a difference?**

A: Yes, some skepticism is good here; it means you care about outcomes. The—to me, still shocking—truth is that an especially effective charity can be a hundred times more impactful than the average one.

At Animal Charity Evaluators, we recommend charities using three main criteria: impact (how many and how much do they help animals in relation to the cost of their work?), room for more funding (how much additional support can they meaningfully absorb?), and organizational health (how responsibly do they run the organization?). Our research team uses quantitative modeling, qualitative analysis, expert consultations, and ongoing dialogue with the nonprofits—examining data closely and asking probing questions until we understand both their achievements and challenges.

So, if you wonder whether your money can make a difference, the answer is yes. It's not unlikely that your donation will do even more good than any other action you take. Organizations can tackle the structural and systemic nature of animal suffering that is nearly impossible to address as an individual.

**Q: What organizations have you been most impressed with? What have they accomplished?**

A: Here are just three very different organizations for you from our Recommended Charity Fund: Wild Animal Initiative, Sinergia Animal, and Dansk Vegetarisk Forening. DVF not only engaged with politicians from across the political spectrum, they gained farmer support and secured a government plan to invest in plant-based initiatives and transform farming systems. Sinergia, active in Southeast Asia and South America, pressured major companies including a Starbucks supplier and hotel chains to switch to cage-free products, while their undercover investigation led the Colombian Congress to create a government committee for animal transport improvements. WAI's mission is to accelerate science that helps wild animals. They advocated for wild animals at the UN biodiversity summit, while their researchers published groundbreaking papers in top journals, and awarded research grants to advance wild animals' well-being. Together, these examples show the breadth of approaches that can move the needle for animals—each demonstrating tangible progress.

# A MAGAZINE THAT LOVES ANIMALS

## AND THAT ANIMALS LOVE BACK

currentaffairs.org

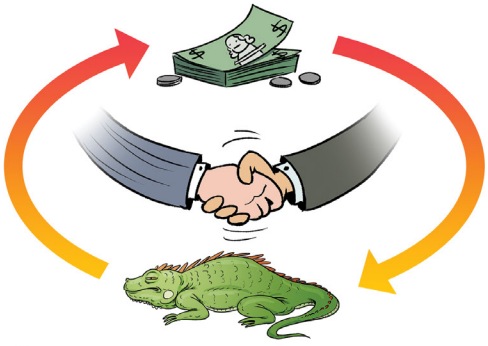

COSTUME COORDINATOR: EMLEY KERRY

EVERYTHING TO KNOW ABOUT...

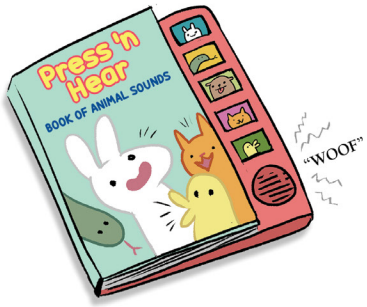
# ANIMALS

Discover the fascinating world of non-human lifeforms commonly referred to as animals – their potential uses, flesh types, and which ones made our "best of" list

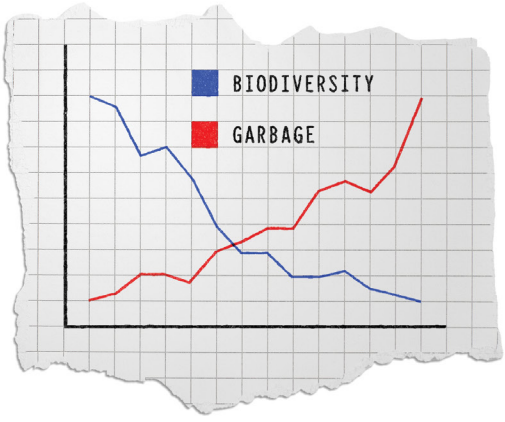
## What are animals?



ANIMALS ARE A TYPE OF PROPERTY that people have a right to use and destroy.

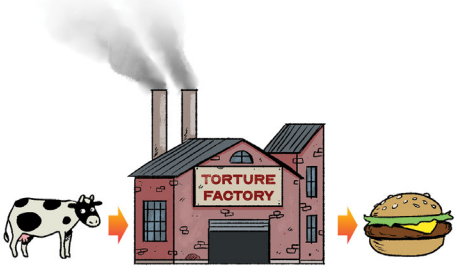



*Many informative books have been written about animals. Visit your local library!*




*Animals are being rendered obsolete and extinct by the inevitable systemic machinations of the great men who rule over us, so enjoy them while they last.*

## Uses for animals




HAMBURGER

HUNTING FOR THRILLS


WATCH THEM GO INSANE

## Guide to the main animal flesh types

Feathered


Scaly


Hairy


The smooth, matte finish of consumer electronics

# The best animals

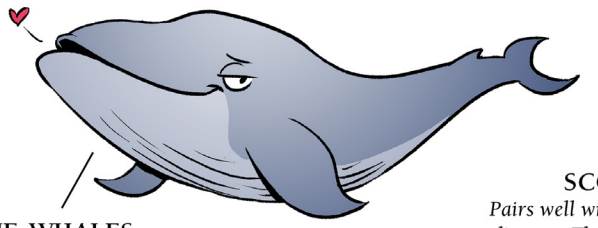
*As determined by experts*

**CHIMPS**

*We used to make them smoke cigarettes, drive little cars, and star in movies with Ronald Reagan. Now mostly known for their face-removal skills.*

**FLAMINGOS**

*A reminder of the stupidity and malice of God (non-pejorative). Eating shrimp makes them pink.*



**BLUE WHALES**

*The largest, and therefore horniest, animals of all time with the biggest packages.*

**SCORPIONS**

*Pairs well with a blacklight and a nudie mag. The rock 'n roll muscle car of the animal kingdom.*

**CROCODILES**

*Since domestication in 2004, they are now the primary source of Alligator Milk.*

**ROCKS**

*This animal always brings a smile to the face of animal lovers. Weakness: Erosion*

# The worst animals

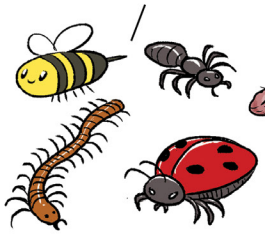
*Animals have an evil side*

**BEAVERS**

*They do not look right. I am tortured by knowing they are real. They need to leave me alone.*

**TINY LITTLE BUGS**

*They're too small and fucked up. It makes me sick they exist.*



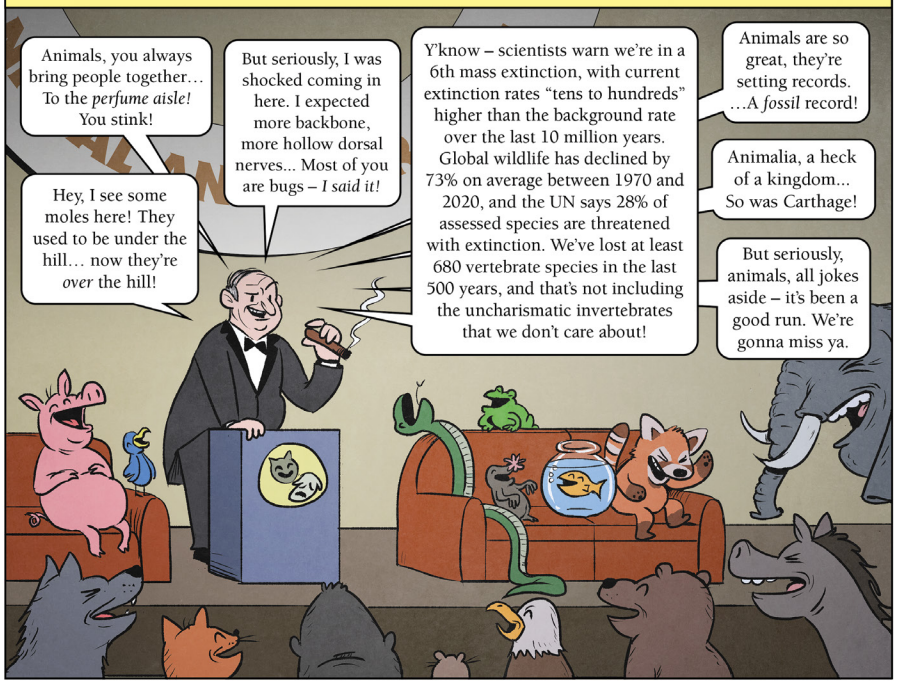
**RATS**

*They are the "beavers of the city."*

**SPARROWS**

*They are the "beavers of the trees."*

## Animal Roast




## Animal FAQ

**WHERE DOES ANIMALS COME FROM?**

The night time.

**WHAT DO I DO IF ANIMALS CAME TO MY HOUSE?**

That would never happen.

**WHO DISCOVERED ANIMALS?**

Joe Animal.

**IS THERE ANIMALS AT THE STORE?**

Yep

**HOW MANY DIFFERENT ANIMALS ARE THERE?**

A hundred.

**WHAT HAPPENED TO THE ANIMALS?**

They went away.


ART AND WRITING:
Matt Beaudoin (X: @scrub_lover)
Shawn Vulliez (X: @wrong_shon)

# CURRENT AFFAIRS IS TEN YEARS OLD!

August 2025

In August, we had the most wonderful weekend here in New Orleans. We had visitors from California, Washington, Michigan, Virginia, Massachusetts, Florida, Indiana, New York, and even from Canada! It really showed just how much this magazine has meant to its readership over the last ten years.

SPEECH! SPEECH!

Nathan J. Robinson reviewed the last ten years, showcasing our insightful articles, beautiful art, and gut-busting amusements, and traced our journey from humble Kickstarter campaign to widely-respected national print periodical. And he gave a pitch for what our magazine could do with new sources of support!

MARX ON THE BEACH


We were also delighted to have longtime CA friends like Amy Goodman, Lindsey Boylan, Hamilton Nolan, Max Alvarez, Max from UNFTR, and Abdul El-Sayed in attendance, plus organizers from Starbucks Workers United and many excellent pro-Palestine activists.


Netroots was a blast, we set up a little CA booth that sold magazine subscriptions all weekend. Emily Topping was able to interview Illinois congresswoman Delia Ramirez, who did not hold her tongue: "I serve with cowards." Nathan gave a training called "How To Build a Progressive Media Organization From Scratch," giving the lessons learned from ten years of keeping a print magazine alive on a shoestring budget.

EMILY

# A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO

Joseph P. Carroll
Gabriel Goldberg
John Halle
Linda Huang
Olivia Lilley
Hassan Martini
Christopher Milenkevich
Sean Nestor
Harjot Singh
Andy Sternard


SONYA, AMY & MALIK


Amy was kind enough to congratulate us on our ten-year anniversary, during her keynote speech.

After Hurricane Katrina, Malik Rahim, the founder of Common Ground Relief, was interviewed by Amy Goodman and they developed a special bond. Sonya of CA was determined to get them back together. This took quite a bit of coordinating, but she pulled it off, and Malik and Amy had a beautiful, touching reunion at Netroots.

Alex Skopic was also able to conduct interviews with Yasmine Taeb of the MPower Change Action Fund and Jason Woods of Starbucks Workers United. Alex and Nathan also interviewed Abdul El-Sayed about his current senate run in Michigan.

# A COMING MORAL REVOLUTION

BY **WAYNE HSIUNG**

Two technological revolutions drove human beings to become the dominant species on this planet. The Agricultural Revolution gave us dominion over the biology of earth. The Industrial Revolution gave us dominion over its physics. Now, powered by breakthroughs in our understanding of intelligence, a third revolution may be imminent. It could solve problems that once seemed impossible, like climate change and war. It could trigger transformations in technology that allow us to cure intractable diseases and send humanity to the stars. It could exponentially increase the wisdom of every human being on earth.

You may think I'm speaking of artificial intelligence (AI). I'm not. That is secondary to another, far more important revolution. This is a Moral Revolution—the expansion of ethical consideration to all sentient beings. And if it is realized, it could allow us to harness a tool far more powerful than biology or physics: the collective will of the universe.

It may seem implausible to think we're on the cusp of such a change. After all, the moral circle seems to be shrinking by the day. Across the world, right-wing movements are successfully mobilizing people to see "others" as "threats." But if the claim seems dramatic, it's only because we're not looking at the right timescale.

Over a span of centuries, rather than months or years, progress has been steady in expanding our circle of moral consideration. Consider that a hundred years ago, institutional racism was not just widespread: it was culturally ascendant. The film *Birth of a Nation*, described as "the most reprehensibly racist film in Hollywood history," showcased Black Americans as predators who would rape or kill white woman. This blatant racism was not just tolerated. It made the film into the most watched film, at the time, in American history. Zoom back another 50 years, and we are in the 1870s, decades before women have earned the right to vote. Susan B. Anthony decided to vote in the 1872 Presidential election anyways, and she was arrested for doing so. The poll workers who allowed her to vote were imprisoned. Finally, zoom back another 50 years, and we are in the 1820s, approximately ten years before the founding of the American Antislavery Society. It was consid-

## Q&A | THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF MEAT | CAROL J. ADAMS

**LEADING FEMINIST AND AUTHOR**

**Carol J. Adams is the author of the classic 1989 book *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, which has become "a bible of the vegan community." She joined *Current Affairs* to explain the basics of her argument about why feminism and animal welfare activism go hand-in-hand.**

**Q: I'm sure a lot of people's reaction to your work goes through a familiar sequence: it first sounds absurd to them, but then the moment they think about it, they realize what you are saying is in fact entirely obvious and undeniable. How do you start to introduce people to the connection between sex and meat, and show them that feminism and vegetarianism are not totally unrelated ideas?**

A: Sometimes the cover of *The Sexual Politics of Meat* does all the heavy lifting, with its image of a woman from the backside, with her flesh marked as different cuts of meat—chuck, rib, etc. It enables me to talk about the misogyny behind it—women imagined as objects who are consumable. I also introduce the idea of "the absent referent," how animals disappear conceptually when

ered relatively uncontroversial that human beings of color could be the property of other human beings. Their lives, their freedom, even their children were not their own. People did not just defend this horrific institution in the 1820s. They fought and died to prevent it from changing. In every one of these time periods, even many of those who were considered progressives and social reformers in their time—like Thomas Jefferson, who himself owned slaves—have been judged harshly by history.

It will be the same when future generations look back on our treatment of animals. Anyone who thinks seriously about it already knows it to be the case. The overwhelming consensus among experts in neuroscience is that animals are conscious, just like us. Every day, a seemingly-unique ability of human intelligence, such as language, is discovered in other animals. And virtually every time a writer or thinker tries to list the ways in which modern society will be condemned by future generations, animal rights is at the top of the list. Consider this op-ed by Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times*, at the height of the George Floyd protests:

> *As we pull down controversial statues and reassess historical figures, I've been wondering what our great-grandchildren will find bewilderingly immoral about our own times — and about us. Which of today's heroes will be discredited? Which statues toppled? What will later generations see as our own ethical blind spots? I believe that one will be our cruelty to animals. Modern society relies on factory farming to produce protein that is inexpensive and abundant. But it causes suffering to animals on an incalculable scale.*

Or consider historian Rutger Bregman's recent statement in support of animal rights. Bregman is no animal rights activist, yet concludes categorically that "200 years from now… the way we treat animals will rank among our biggest crimes." Even many conservatives have reached the same conclusion. Charles Krauthammer, one of the nation's most prominent right-wing columnists, argued near the end of his life that future generations would condemn us for eating animals: "I'm convinced that our great-grandchildren will find it difficult to believe that we actually raised, herded and slaughtered them on an industrial scale — for the eating."

There are countless other examples. The distinguished philosopher Martha Nussbaum has described species membership as a "frontier of justice" and has devoted much of her recent work to defending animal rights. The futurist Yuval Noah Harari has condemned industrial animal agriculture as "one of the worst crimes in history." And *New York Times* columnist Ezra Klein has argued that "we will look back on this age of cruelty to animals with horror."

But why should we be so confident that future generations will continue to expand the circle? The first reason is philosophical. Peter Singer argues that moral systems that expand rights have a natural logic that causes them to win out over their exclusive alternatives. "Rights to me but not to thee" simply doesn't have much rhetorical power. The second is economic. The Economics Nobel Laureates Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson have shown that nations with exclusive institutions are far more likely to fail. Even people with privilege can see the moral circle shrinking and ask, "What's to prevent someone from pushing me out next?" That makes them unlikely to invest.

Perhaps the most fascinating explanation for moral expansion, however, comes from evolutionary biologist Joseph Henrich. The secret power of human beings, Henrich argues, is our collective brain. Through cooperation, we are able to coordinate knowledge and effort across vast spans of space and time. The result of this buildup of knowledge is exponential growth in technology and power.

Crucial to Henrich's thesis, however, is the moral universalism

they are eaten—not just killed, but also renamed, and reshaped. As a result, thoughts about the violence animals experienced as they were made into cuts of meat disappear, and their fate can be applied, in images, to women.

Or I begin with the connection between meat and masculinity; the assumption that men need to eat meat. Throughout the decades, advertisements emphasize "manning up" or that one must "renew his man card" by eating meat. As a corollary, men who are vegetarian or vegan may be mocked or criticized, or, by homophobes, thought to be gay. These responses indicate that vegan men are supposedly threatening something essential to a dominant masculine identity. The insistence that men can "restore" something—manhood, masculinity—reveals how unstable masculine identity really is. You can only restore what has already been destabilized! Since 2016, I have also described how white supremacists and right wing influencers connected meat eating and milk drinking with whiteness and maleness.

**Q: Your website includes a gallery showcasing examples of the sexual politics of meat. What are these like?**

A: Some show women animalized—that is, women on all fours, or on the ground next to a man who rises vertically next to her, or fragmented (think of our language, "piece of ass," "breast man," "leg man") often headless, or depicted like cuts of meat. Others show animals *feminized*—that is, the stereotypes of a conventional seductive female sexuality imposed on images of animals. They are depicted with nail polish, curled eyelashes, jutting hips, wearing bikinis that emphasize their "breasts", with a "come hither" look. These sexual references massage the dead meat into a doubly consumable object. Better to think of oneself as enjoying a breast, or a thigh, or a rack than the fragmented body parts of slaughtered animals.

**Q: How can we notice these in our day to day lives?**

A: If you find yourself laughing at a menu offering "A Double D Cup Breast of Turkey" sandwich, or behind a truck hauling pigs to slaughter that shows a sexualized pig in a knowing "come and get me" pose, stop and ask, "what's the message here?" These are examples of how human dominance over animals is presented in a tableau in which men = human and women = animals and their desire is to be dominated. I've noticed that after becoming acquainted with the ideas in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, people go from never imagining a connection to seeing it everywhere; when they see it, they know it, and then they send it to me.

that spread across the world beginning in the 4th century. For thousands of years, human beings and our ancestors had built social networks around those who were our genetic relatives. This limited our ability to cooperate, as families can only grow so large. But when Christianity disrupted this kin-based order in favor of one based on universal moral worth, that bottleneck was removed. Suddenly, nations could facilitate knowledge sharing across millions of people, not hundreds. It was the greatest unlocking of human potential in history.

Could something be similarly unlocked if our moral circle expanded to other species? The idea of animals and humans working together might seem like a biblical fantasy. Yet consider that the domestication of animals has already become among the most successful collaborations, in terms of planetary biomass, in Earth's history. Of course, that evolutionary success has come at great cost: the enslavement and torture of billions of living beings. (Indeed, our abuse of animals is probably one of the primary reasons we have been able to domesticate so few of them.) But it shows the potential. Two species working together can achieve things that each species alone could never hope to achieve. And that is what expanding the circle promises: a world where all animals can direct our will towards the collective good.

It could not come a moment too soon. AI may soon give far more humans on this planet the ability to create powerful technologies such as bioweapons. If we haven't learned to harness the collective will of sentient beings towards pro-social purposes, one of these humans (or an AI agent) may unleash another calamity. But there are even greater reasons to fear a future without an expanding circle. If AI becomes supremely powerful, as many fear, then it may see us in the same way we currently see animals—cute but ultimately dumb and morally irrelevant creatures. An expanding circle, beyond the frontiers of intelligence or species, may be the only thing that saves us.

It will do much more than that. The human condition has benefitted immensely from civilizations with diverse populations looking beyond religion, race, or creed. The condition of all sentient beings will be similarly transformed if we expand the circle beyond species. ✣

# Q&A | WHY RESCUE CHICKENS?

## ZOE ROSENBERG

**FOUNDER, HAPPY HEN SANCTUARY**

**Zoe Rosenberg is the founder of the Happy Hen Animal Sanctuary and a student at UC Berkeley. She is currently being prosecuted after taking four chickens from a factory farm in 2023. She faces up to five and a half years in prison.**

**Q: You're facing potential prison time. Why do you think the industry pursues these cases so aggressively, given that the value of the rescued chickens is so small to them financially?**

A: One of the greatest threats to animal agriculture is the idea that animals are individuals with lives worth living. If I had rescued Poppy, Ivy, Aster, and Azalea and never shared their stories with the world, I don't think I would be facing this prosecution. Perdue Farms only valued the four chickens I rescued at $6 each. That's nothing to a multi-billion dollar company. But these industries know that if the public starts to recognize the animals they are abusing as the individuals they are, they will lose support. Perdue is furious that I'm introducing the world to their victims.

This prosecution is also a scare tactic. They want to deter other people who may dare to speak out against companies that are hurting animals or even step in to rescue those animals themselves.

**Q: Why do you choose the particular chickens that you rescue?**

A: Because chickens are suffering on such a mass scale, I try to rescue those who are in the most immediate and desperate need of aid. In factory farms and in slaughterhouses,every single bird could benefit from being rescued. But when I enter one of these facilities, I look for those who are in urgent need of medical attention, who are likely to die if they don't get that care in a timely manner.

**Q: What do you think these kinds of rescues can accomplish beyond the lives they give to the individual chickens themselves?**

A: When people watch investigative footage of animals suffering in the food industry, it is easy for them to become desensitized, often just as a coping mechanism. It is hard to see animals in pain, and it is even easier to disconnect from their pain when you are watching a video of hundreds or even thousands of animals. You don't connect with any one individual enough to feel invested in their story. When we are able to zoom in on one animal and allow people to get to know them and root for their recovery as they are rescued, it helps people connect. The happy ending makes the story easier to accept and remember. The stories of these animals can stick with people, and are an important reminder that every animal suffering in factory farms and slaughterhouses is someone, not a commodity or product.


BONE ORIGIN
Canine Space Cruises...
For the hound who has everything
LAIKA II
INTERSTELLAR TRAVEL FOR THE POOCHES OF THE TERRESTRIAL ELITE

# *the Illustrators*


55TH EDITION

COVER ART: C.M. DUFFY