

 Compassion Over Killing


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ABOLITIONIST #4

EDITORIAL: NATIONALS AND GRASSROOTS

By Mike Markarian

When I first became involved in the animal rights movement, about ten years ago, I was active with both grassroots and national groups. Our animal rights group in Buffalo, N.Y., held numerous grassroots protests at local fur stores and rodeos. And when PETA called and asked us to help with a demo, or when the Fund for Animals called and asked us to help with a hunt sabotage, we were more than happy to work with them.

It seemed to be a very cooperative and symbiotic relationship —grassroots groups needed the national groups to provide well-researched information, literature, ready-made posters, and other materials, and the national groups needed local activists for support at local events.

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--Mike Markarian

Years later, I work for a national group, and I am still very active with grassroots groups. But it seems that the gap between the two parts of our movement is widening. Among the grassroots movement, there seems to be a growing stigma against national groups. I have been called a “sell-out” and a “compromiser” simply because I work for an organization that is willing to pay me to help animals full-time (rather than having to deliver pizzas or tend bar to fund my activism). I can certainly handle the name-calling—after all, I hear it from hunters every day—but I would like to offer some thoughts on how and why national and grassroots groups can be beneficial to each other. And, more importantly, how the animals can benefit.

To begin, I would like to summarize something I learned from Bill Moyer of the Social Movement Project. He has studied the evolution of different social movements, and has reported on the similarities between the steps that every social movement goes through. I don't agree with every single thing he says, but

simply offer his insight as that of someone outside the animal rights movement who has extensive experience with social movements.

Bill Moyer claims that every social movement has four types of activists, and within each of the four groups there are “effective” and “ineffective” activists. The four groups are:

1. THE CITIZEN

The “citizen” is an activist who is seen to be upholding good social values. For example, if a dog is tied to a tree and shot with arrows, and an animal rights group offers a reward for information leading to the identity of the person who committed that crime, then that animal rights group is viewed as upholding values that the general public supports, and is an effective citizen activist. By trying to bring out people’s goodness, the citizen says “YES” to that which is right. When fighting the pigeon shoots in Pennsylvania, the Fund for Animals has published advertisements stating that if it were happening to kittens or puppies, people would be horrified—people already have compassion for kittens and puppies, and the effective citizen activist can try to play on that goodness and convince people to extend their compassion to less charismatic animals. This type of activist also uses celebrity spokespersons to promote mainstream values. Groups like PETA have done a good job of making animal rights a part of pop culture and the mainstream media. Citizen activists can become ineffective if they become super-patriots and blindly believe the information they receive from powerholders and institutions.

2. THE REBEL

While the “citizen” activist says “YES” to that which is right, the “rebel” activist says “NO” to that which is wrong. Direct action, civil disobedience, hunt sabotages, and Animal Liberation Front activities all fall under this category. Activists purposely breaking laws that are unjust, such as hunter harassment laws, or committing acts of civil disobedience to help animals, are effective rebels because they tie the movement’s issues together with First Amendment, freedom of speech, and civil liberties issues. A perfect example of effective rebellion is an Animal Liberation Front raid on a laboratory that frees puppies from its confines and exposes video footage of the researchers torturing the animals. Sure, the activists broke the law, but all of their activities focused directly on saving animals and exposing cruelty. The effective rebel uses the media attention generated through civil disobedience to educate the public about the goals of the movement. An example of the ineffective rebel would be an activist who burns an American flag at a protest or works the phrase “2, 4, 6, 8, Fuck this police state” into an animal rights chant. According to Bill Moyer, 97 percent of Americans consider themselves “patriots,” and we automatically alienate these people from our movement when we focus on anti-America and anti-police remarks, rather than on pro-animal remarks. Moreover, if you only have 15 seconds for a soundbite on the 6:00 news, would you rather hear a quote about the cruelty animals endure on fur farms or a quote about anarchy? Bill Moyer also points out that the ineffective rebel is indistinguishable from the “agent provocateur”—a government agent planted in the movement to discredit it.

3. THE CHANGE AGENT

The “change agent” activist puts the movement’s issue on the political and public agenda. When a county or city proposes a deer hunt in a local

park, activists who mobilize to attend public meetings and get involved with the decision making process are working as effective change agents. Offering alternatives to hunting—such as deer contraception, repellents, roadside reflectors, and fencing—would fall under this category. College students who sponsor a “cruelty-free product drop” on campus—where students can dump their products that are tested on animals in exchange for cruelty-free counterparts—are offering alternatives, involving the community, and promoting the long-term educational goals of the movement. Those who call into radio talk shows, write letters to the editor, and present humane education in schools are all examples of effective change agents focusing on public education. Bill Moyer states that an important function of the change agent is the “nurturer role” to “empower grassroots.” Effective change agents focus their attention on the general public, while ineffective change agents focus their attention on the powerholders. Educating a furrier about the cruelty of fur will probably not make a difference, but bringing our movement’s values to the general public will eventually drive the furrier out of business. The change agents can also become ineffective when the hierarchy and leadership of certain organizations becomes patriarchal and oppressive, or when the organizations get “tunnel vision” and oppose activists using an approach different from their own.

4. THE REFORMER

The “reformer” activist becomes a part of the system and works within the system to promote the movement’s goals. Activists who work on state or federal legislation, file lawsuits to uphold enforcement of current laws, and/or qualify for ballot initiatives to make their own laws are all working as effective reformers. In the last few years alone, animal rights lobbyists have passed federal legislation to cut millions of dollars in subsidies to the mink industry. Activists have won lawsuits in court to stop hunts because the federal or state government violated their own laws, and they have gathered signatures to put laws on the ballot to ban hunting and trapping practices. Effective reformers make incremental steps while continuing to promote the goals of the movement. Ineffective reformers, however, lose sight of the movement goals and promote only minor reforms.

So, you ask, why did I mention all this? Because every activist in the animal rights movement—and in any other social movement—falls into one or more of the above categories. And every activist can be either effective or ineffective in his or her own role. The point is that a movement cannot survive unless it has people working effectively in all four categories. There are some people who are very good at civil disobedience and jail support. There are some people who love to go into schools and talk to children about animal rights. There are some credible scientists and doctors in our movement who can promote alternatives to dissection, hunting, and meat eating. There are some people who love to meet with their elected officials. Everyone in the movement has a niche, and they should all be embraced, not alienated.

The growing split between the grassroots and national groups seems to revolve around two issues: First, certain segments of the grassroots movement believe that unless you are getting arrested at every protest, and unless you follow a certain code of always refusing bail and fines, then you are not doing anything for animals. Second, certain segments of the national movement have turned their backs on the grassroots because they believe that civil disobedience makes the movement look too

radical. Well, we all need to realize that our niche is not the only niche. We can draw from Bill Moyer's action plan and recognize that all four types of activism are crucial to the movement, and that there are some ways that the different types of activists can help each other.

The author is a COK member and the Director of Campaigns and Media of the Fund for Animals.

Editors' Note: We welcome any discussion, comments, and/or constructive criticisms brought up by Nationals and Grassroots.

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