

The Humane Society of the U.S.: It's Not about Animal Shelters

by Daniel T. Oliver, *Alternatives in Philanthropy*, October 1997

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With a \$46-million budget and 4.1 million members, the Washington, D.C.-based Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is the largest animal rights organization in the country. Founded in 1954 and staffed by 200 employees, HSUS is sometimes confused with local humane societies that find homes for unwanted cats and dogs. But according to its own literature, "we are not . . . affiliated with any local animal shelters or humane organizations." Indeed, HSUS's image as an animal welfare organization no doubt helps account for its popularity with animal lovers, who pay annual membership dues of \$10.00 (individual) and \$18.00 (family). Yet HSUS is an animal rights organization, as much as the better-known People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PeTA) examined in the July 1997 *Alternatives in Philanthropy*.

As that issue emphasized, donors who wish to support organizations that help animals must understand the difference between animal rights and animal welfare. Animal rights organizations, which emerged in the early 1980s, seek to end the use and ownership of animals. Animal welfare organizations, on the other hand, have existed for decades and seek to improve the treatment and well-being of animals.

In recent years, HSUS has sought to abolish:

circuses, rodeos, horse and dog racing, and other uses of animals in entertainment; the use of animals for educational purposes, including animal dissection in high school and college biology classes and the keeping of marine mammals in aquariums; the hunting of seals, whales, and elephants and the trapping and raising of fur-bearing mammals; modern livestock and poultry farming, including the use of cages for layer hens and broiler chickens and single stall housing for veal calves; the commercial breeding of dogs.

HSUS's Embrace of Animal Rights

HSUS's acceptance of animal rights appears to have begun some 15 years ago. Its 1980 convention called for the "pursuit on all fronts . . . the clear articulation and establishment of the rights of animals."² At its 1984 convention, John McArdle, then-HSUS director of laboratory animal welfare, urged caution in openly promoting animal rights: "Avoid the words 'animal rights' and 'anti-vivisection' [anti-animal research]. They are too strange for the public. Never appear to be opposed to animal research."³ In 1986, McArdle said that "HSUS is definitely shifting in the direction of animal rights faster than anyone would realize from our literature."⁴ That same year, John Hoyt, HSUS president emeritus, remarked that "This new philosophy [animal rights] has served as a catalyst in the shaping of our own philosophies, policies and goals."⁵

Many HSUS personnel have come from PeTA, according to Americans for Medical Progress (AMP), an Alexandria, Virginia-based nonprofit that promotes the humane use of animals in research. These include: Richard Swain, vice president of investigations; Jonathan Balcombe, Cristobel Block, and Virginia Bollinger, investigations section; Howard Edelstein, computer programmer; Leslie Gerstenfeld and Kimberly Roberts, international affairs; and Leslie Ison and Rachel Lamb, companion animals. HSUS has also recruited employees from other animal rights organizations. John Kullberg, HSUS's head of investigations, is the past president of the New York City-based American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA),

which like HSUS has recently become an animal rights group. Wayne Pacelle, HSUS's vice president of government affairs and media, is the former executive director of Cleveland Amory's Fund for Animals, an anti-hunting group based in New York City. Pacelle once said, "We have no problem with the extinction of domestic animals [e.g., exotic breeds of livestock and poultry]. They are creations of selective human breeding."⁶ Another key HSUS employee is emergency medicine doctor Peggy Carlson, formerly with the Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), a medical and nutritional spokesman for PeTA.

HSUS was a major presence at the June 1997 Animal Rights National Convention, held near Washington, D.C. HSUS speakers included Martin Stephens, vice president of animal research issues; Patricia Forkan, executive vice president; Howard Lyman, director of Eating with a Conscience Campaign, who discussed ways to use the media to promote animal rights; and Michael Fox, vice president of bioethics and farm animal protection, who has written, "the life of an ant and that of my child should be granted equal consideration."⁹

HSUS also awards small grants to dozens of animal rights organizations each year. These include: Animal Rights Community, Animal Rights International, the Committee to Abolish Sport Hunting, the International Society for Animal Rights, the New England Anti-vivisection Society, and the World Society for the Protection of Animals.

What accounts for the radicalization of HSUS? One possibility is that HSUS leaders are genuinely convinced of the view, expressed by Peter Singer in his 1975 book *Animal Liberation*, that animals should not be used for human benefit.¹⁰ But another possibility is that promoting animal rights can be more lucrative than promoting animal welfare. In recent years, HSUS seems to have taken its cue from PeTA, which rapidly rose from obscurity to become a multi-million-dollar organization by pioneering the use of direct mail which contained sensational claims of animal abuse. HSUS's John Hoyt has remarked, "PeTA successfully stole the spotlight. . . . Groups like ours that have plugged along with a larger staff, a larger constituency . . . have been ignored. . . . Since we haven't been successful in getting half a loaf, let's go for the whole thing."¹¹

An examination of HSUS shows that many of its arguments and allegations are misleading and cannot be substantiated. HSUS uses them to advocate public policies that would deny Americans their right to benefit from traditional, humane uses of animals.

Lassie Won't Be Coming Home

HSUS promotes restrictions on pet breeding and ownership that would sharply limit the supply of pets and ultimately deny many responsible pet owners the pet of their choice. It maintains that there is a "raging pet-overpopulation crisis . . . an appalling overabundance of dogs and cats caused by human carelessness and irresponsible breeding."¹² Because an estimated 4.5 million dogs and cats are euthanized each year in the U.S., HSUS has called for the elimination of large dog breeding kennels and the enactment of mandatory pet sterilization laws.

Some euthanasia will always be needed because some animals are too old, sick, or vicious to be adopted. But in fact, euthanasia has dropped dramatically in the last two decades despite a doubling of the dog and cat population. In 1973, 20 percent (13 million) of all dogs and cats were euthanized, compared to less than five percent today.¹³ This reduction is largely attributable to humane organizations, veterinarians, breeders, and concerned citizens who have recommended or paid for pet sterilization, sponsored dog obedience-training classes (behavior problems are the main cause of dog abandonment), and otherwise informed the public about responsible pet ownership.

HSUS argues that so-called "puppy mills"—large dog breeding kennels that "mass produce dogs for resale in pet stores"—are a main cause of pet overpopulation.¹⁴

The kennels, it contends, engage in "cruel commerce" that treats puppies "like so much merchandise." Living conditions are said to be "squalid," "foul," "unsanitary" and "inhumane," and puppies are "ill-treated," "often ill," and "sick and traumatized."¹⁵

However, HSUS does not define "mass" production, other than to say that it "may" involve "hundreds of dogs." Moreover, it offers no evidence that conditions among the limited number of "large" kennels it has investigated are typical of larger kennels in general, or that conditions are better (or worse) among smaller- or medium-sized kennels. USDA inspectors already visit licensed dog kennels at least once a year and respond to complaints about unlicensed kennels. (In 1994, the USDA inspected 10,705 kennels.) Minor infractions are sometimes found, and a few kennels have been shut down. But there is no evidence of widespread abuse or neglect of dogs at breeding kennels.

Nonetheless, HSUS consultant and former chief investigator Robert Baker has said, "I don't care if these people go to jail or not. I don't care what happens to them. I just don't want them in the business of dealing with dogs."¹⁶ HSUS's John Hoyt told one audience, "Don't breed, don't buy, don't even accept giveaways. . . . The 'good' pet stores we shall encourage to become even better, which ultimately might mean selling no dogs and cats."¹⁷ Baker has similarly advised the public to "stop buying puppies in stores."¹⁸

Yet even assuming a widespread puppy mill problem, a boycott of pet stores would do little to address the matter: only six to eight percent of the 5.7 million dogs born each year are sold in pet stores; the rest are sold directly by breeders.¹⁹

HSUS has also proposed mandatory pet sterilization laws and high license fees to deal with pet overpopulation. In 1993, it called on local, county, and state legislators to enact either voluntary or mandatory dog and cat breeding bans and to initiate mandatory pet sterilization laws. While HSUS president Paul Irwin said that "HSUS is not attempting to eliminate companion animals with these measures," the mandatory breeding ban contained these stipulations:

"A two year moratorium would be imposed on all breeding" and would be lifted when a government-appointed task force "so recommends;"

"During the moratorium, retail pet establishments would be prohibited from selling dogs and cats under the age of six months" (i.e., no puppies or kittens);

"Penalties: For each puppy or kitten born in violation of the moratorium, the owner or person possessing the animal shall pay a penalty of \$100. . . .;"

"All cat and dog owners [would be required] to purchase a license / mandatory ID tag. For those owners who want to keep their animals [fecund], a \$100 per year surcharge would be required;"

"If an individual wanted to breed an animal, a breeder permit could be obtained" for an additional \$100. "If a person breeds without a permit," the fine would be \$250 per litter plus \$10 for each animal.²⁰

Such tight restrictions on legal markets for puppies and kittens would almost certainly encourage gray or black markets for these animals, where safeguards on animal welfare would be minimal or nonexistent.

HSUS and the New Jersey Humane Society recently promoted a bill (A2612) in that state that would have required commercial breeders, defined as anyone "who owns or operates a breeding facility and sells or offers for sale more than five dogs or cats per year," to register with the state. Of course, a single litter often has more than five kittens or puppies. While the bill did not leave committee and was withdrawn before a vote, HSUS sought to impose stringent kennel standards that would likely have driven many breeders out of business.

These stipulated that:

Indoor temperatures be maintained at 50 to 80 degrees for dogs over eight weeks of age and 65 to 80 degrees for puppies and kittens under eight weeks;

Air be circulated eight to 12 times per hour;

Indoor dog runs of appropriate sizes be provided for different breeds of dogs;

Separate enclosures of appropriate sizes be provided for cats;

Dogs receive twenty minutes of unleashed exercise per day.²¹

A first offense would have brought a \$5,000 fine and a five-year ban on the sale of dogs and cats. Subsequent violations would have earned a \$10,000 fine and additional five-year bans. Hearings would be held only at the request of the accused individual.

While HSUS operates programs to train shelter workers, it runs no animal shelters and makes no significant contributions to them. When the Washington (D.C.) Humane Society, a separate organization, almost closed its animal shelter in 1995 due to a lack of funds, HSUS did nothing—despite its multi-million-dollar budget. Ironically, that same year HSUS withdrew an offer to build and operate at its own expense a model animal shelter in the District of Columbia. In exchange, HSUS wanted three to five acres of city land and tax-exempt status for all its real estate holdings in the city. Negotiations ended when HSUS sent a letter to Mayor Marion Barry saying it would not proceed unless it could "own absolutely" the land, a condition the city was unable to meet.

Making the Fur Fly

HSUS has spearheaded the campaign to make fur garments socially unacceptable. Following the lead of animal rights groups in Europe, HSUS officially launched its "Shame of Fur" campaign in 1988, posting messages on billboards and buses, running radio announcements, and distributing press kits and videos. In the manner of PeTA, it has also enlisted the support of celebrities, including Candice Bergen, Betty White, Rue McClanahan, and Bea Arthur to denounce fur fashion.

HSUS's anti-fur campaign is actually part of a larger campaign against hunting and trapping. HSUS spent \$545,340 on state-level anti-hunting ballot initiatives in 1996—more than any other animal rights organization.

Many urban and suburban donors who receive literature from HSUS cannot be expected to understand the nature of or need for hunting and trapping. Yet wildlife management is necessary in many parts of the country to protect human lives, property, and agriculture and to protect threatened and endangered species. Deer overpopulation leads to countless deer-car collisions, some of which result in injury or death. Farmers lose millions of dollars worth of

livestock and poultry each year to predators—even with hunting and trapping. Beavers build dams that flood suburban neighborhoods and homes. Foxes eat many species of endangered and threatened birds.

HSUS alleges that "animal cruelty [is] inherent in the fur industry. Millions of sentient animals are raised or trapped and brutally killed each year for fur garments. . . ."22 The centerpiece of HSUS's campaign is to outlaw the steel-jaw leghold trap, a device that captures animals by the foot or paw. HSUS makes the following claims about the traps: They cause "excruciating agony."23 In fact, they apply pressure to two sides of an animal's limb, causing numbness;

"Animals frequently bite off their own trapped limbs" in efforts to escape.24

This happens only on very rare occasions. If animals "frequently" bit off their limbs and escaped, trappers obviously could not make money trapping;

"Animals may remain trapped for long periods, during which they are likely to suffer and die from exhaustion, dehydration, predation, freezing, or starvation. . . . Many animals have been found alive after suffering in traps for as long as two weeks."25 Research shows that most trapped animals are held for less than eight hours.26 Many states require that leghold traps be inspected every 24 hours. Even so, most trappers, out of economic interest, check their traps two or three times a day since poachers or predators may take captured animals;

"Five million nontarget animals . . . are accidentally caught in traps . . . each year," and "small children" and pets are also at risk.27 Many animals inadvertently caught are actually secondary target species such as skunks that threaten birds or livestock. Trappers minimize the possibility of accidental captures by using appropriately sized traps and selective baits and by placing traps in ideal locations such as just outside a muskrat burrow. Leghold traps, which are usually fairly small, spring harmlessly under human feet. There is no documented case of a child being seriously injured in a leghold trap. While unsupervised pets have sometimes been caught, attended pets can usually be released without harm by compressing the trap springs;

Trapping "threatens the survival of entire species." Because hunting and trapping are highly regulated in all 50 states, no species of animal in the U.S. today is threatened or endangered because of them.

HSUS also seeks to end the raising of furbearing animals, which accounts for 80 percent of all fur pelts sold in the U.S. It contends that animals "imprisoned" on fur farms suffer "stress and pain" from living in "tiny mesh wire cages" where they "often can barely turn around." Moreover, they are killed by electrocution, neck breaking, and drowning.

Some 2.5 million mink and 25,000 foxes are raised annually on 450 fur farms, mostly family-owned. Since mink, in particular, are very susceptible to disease, they must be fed a fresh, high-quality diet free from contaminants. Gunnar Jorgenson, head of research at the State Animal Husbandry Station in Hilleroed, Denmark, notes that "it is characteristic of [mink and foxes] that they cannot develop or reproduce normally if conditions are not optimum with regard to cages, food and care. . . ."30 Sven Wahlberg, general secretary of the World Wildlife Fund (Sweden) and Gunnar Krantz, chairman of the Swedish Federation of Animal Protection Societies, add that "working with furbearing animals is . . . both hard work and time-consuming. [The animals] must be cared for every day—weekday, weekend or public holiday. It takes a real interest in animals to work up the best material. The farmer who has no real interest in his animals or feeling for their welfare soon suffers himself, in the form of poor financial return."31

Research shows that neither a 400 percent increase nor a 50 percent reduction in cage size cause any changes in behavior.³² Mink are usually killed the same way that dogs and cats are euthanized in shelters: they are placed in an airtight container filled with carbon monoxide or dioxide bottled gas. The unit is mobile and is brought to the cages to minimize stress from handling. The animals are immediately rendered unconscious and die without pain. For fox, lethal injection that causes immediate cardiac arrest is typically used.

Despite the anti-fur campaign of HSUS and other animal rights organizations, annual fur sales in the U.S. have remained relatively constant since 1990, peaking at \$1.25 billion in 1996. More designers are working with fur than ten years ago, and many models and celebrities have forsaken earlier pledges not to wear fur.

Whale of a Tale

HSUS also seeks to "stop commercial whaling." Its website (<http://www.hsus.org>) says that "twenty years ago the world finally realized that whale populations were perilously threatened by the whaling that had occurred in the oceans for more than a century. A long struggle to save the whales finally culminated in the 1986 International Whaling Commission (IWC) decision to place a worldwide moratorium on commercial whaling."³⁴ However, Norway defied the ban in 1993 and resumed hunting minke whales (one of the smallest whale species). HSUS has since urged American consumers to boycott Norwegian products, including fish, cheese, petroleum, and travel to Norway. It has also unsuccessfully pressured the Clinton Administration to enact trade sanctions against Norway.

A potential donor could easily conclude from this that whales are threatened or endangered. In fact, the IWC, an international association formed to conserve whale stocks, enacted a temporary five-year moratorium on commercial whaling so that scientific assessment of worldwide stocks could be made. (IWC members voted to extend the ban in 1991 and again in 1992.) In 1993, the IWC's Scientific Committee concluded that only five of 76 species of whales worldwide were threatened or endangered. The other 71 were abundant enough to sustain regulated hunting.

Nonetheless, in 1993 IWC delegates, apparently bowing to public pressure, voted 16 to 10 (with six abstentions) to continue the ban. Three months earlier, the U.S. House of Representatives had voted unanimously for a resolution, strongly promoted by HSUS, to oppose a resumption of commercial whaling. Janice Henke, a longtime observer of the animal rights movement, notes that the international scientific community realizes there is no biological basis for objecting to minke whaling: "Yet an animal rights minority has so skillfully communicated its message to the general public that international politics demands a continued ban. People's thinking has been carefully shaped by animal rights professionals. Mass letter-writing campaigns and petition campaigns ensure that this issue is managed by political, not biological, realities."³⁵

The IWC estimates that there are one million minke whales worldwide and 112,000 in the Northeast Atlantic Ocean. Norway hunted 425 minkes off its coast in 1996, which in no way threatened stocks. In the coastal communities of Norway, hunting, fishing, and whaling are the main means of livelihood. Whaling generally accounts for half the income of a fishing vessel, and there are few alternative means of employment.

Ultimately, HSUS's opposition to whaling appears to rest on the view that whales are somehow "sacred." But just as beef is part of the traditional American diet, whale meat has long been part of the Norwegian diet.

This has prompted some critics to accuse HSUS of cultural imperialism. Says Norwegian foreign minister Bjorn Tore Godal, "Imagine India being in the position of threatening the U.S. with trade sanctions if it didn't accept the sanctity of the cow. The principle is the same."³⁶

Past Its Peak?

As the July 1997 *Alternatives in Philanthropy* noted, any effort to gauge the strength of the animal rights movement reveals mixed signs. Animal rights groups may be gaining clout in the legislative arena, where they have 15 years experience. They successfully lobbied Congress to amend the federal Animal Welfare Act, which covers the feeding, sanitation, and housing of animals used in biomedical research. This added an estimated \$1 billion in regulatory costs to animal research in 1990—money that could not be used for biomedical research.

Animal rights groups have also effectively lobbied at the state and local levels for anti-hunting and -trapping initiatives that ban the capture of particular species. Moreover, a terrorist fringe of the movement, led by the underground Animal Liberation Front (ALF), may be stepping up attacks on animal research laboratories, livestock and poultry farms, and other animal-use concerns.

On the other hand, while most Americans have by now heard the animal rights message, their attitudes and behavior do not appear to have significantly changed. A recent survey by Responsive Management, a Harrisonburg, Virginia-based public-opinion polling firm, concludes that only three percent of Americans "live by the animal rights doctrine." Ninety-seven percent of those surveyed had eaten chicken or consumed dairy products during the past two years. Ninety-two percent had eaten beef, 81 percent had worn leather, 76 percent owned a pet, 57 percent visited a zoo, 39 percent fished, 24 percent had gone to a circus, and 17 percent had hunted. Moreover, 79 percent agreed that "animals can be used by humans as long as the animal does not experience undue pain." Eighty-six percent agreed that "people should have the freedom to choose to wear fur." And 92 percent disapproved of "protesting fur clothing in a harassing manner."³⁷

Policies promoted by animal rights groups are also being reconsidered. As discussed, Norway has defied the International Whaling Commission's ban on commercial whaling. The United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) recently eased a 1989 ban on international trade in ivory. Under an "experimental" agreement, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Botswana will sell 59 tons of stockpiled ivory to Japan in 1999. Congress also recently passed an amendment to the Marine Mammal Protection Act that in 1998 will lift a seven-year U.S. embargo on tuna caught by Mexican fishing vessels. HSUS and other animal rights groups supported the ban, claiming that too many dolphins, which often swim near schools of tuna, were frightened or accidentally killed during fishing expeditions. Yet due to Mexican efforts, dolphin deaths have declined from as many as 130,000 annually in the 1980s to an estimated 2,500 in the Eastern Tropical Pacific Fishery. The embargo also cost Mexico \$350 million and 6,000 jobs.

Whatever the future of the animal right movement, HSUS, with its recent influx of staff from PeTA and other animal rights groups, is likely to push an even more strident animal rights agenda in the years to come. But as Americans who now perceive HSUS as an animal welfare organization come to understand its true agenda, its fortunes are almost certain to decline.

Notes

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4. McArdle, quoted in *ibid.*, p.116.
5. John Hoyt, quoted in McCabe, "Katie McCabe Replies," Washingtonian, October 1986, pp. 109-110.
6. Wayne Pacelle, quoted in Putting People First, facsimile transmission dated March 24, 1992.
7. AMP, "What's Happening with Our Humane Groups? Inside the Humane Society of the United States," October 1996, and "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: The HSUS—PeTA Connection."
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9. Michael W. Fox, *Inhumane Society* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1990).
10. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Avon Books, 1975.)
11. John Hoyt, quoted in Carol Matlack, "Animal-Rights Furor," National Journal, September 7, 1991, p. 2145.
12. HSUS, Close-Up Report, May 1992.
13. Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy, cited in Andrew Rowan, "Pet Overpopulation: the Problem and the Remedy," *Our Animal Wards*, Fall 1991, p. 10.
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16. Robert Baker, quoted in "Not Fit for a Dog," *Life*, September 1992, p. 40.
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22. HSUS website, "Anti-Fur Campaign."
23. HSUS, "Animals: It's their World, Too," brochure.
24. HSUS, "Fight Fur Now!"
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26. National Trappers Association (NTA), "Traps Today: Myths and Facts."
27. HSUS, "Fight Fur Now!" and "Trapping in the Nineties: Who Pays the Price," *HSUS News*, Fall 1992, p. 9.
28. HSUS, "Fight Fur Now!"
29. HSUS, "Fur Is Out, Compassion Is In," October 1989.
30. Gunnar Jorgenson, quoted in Fur Farm Animal Welfare Coalition (FFAWC), "Fur Farming in North America."
31. Sven Wahlberg and Gunnar Krantz, quoted in *ibid.*
32. NTA, "Fact about Furs!" 1988 booklet, p. 17.
33. HSUS, website, "Anti-Whaling / Norway Campaign."
34. *Ibid.*
35. Janice Henke, paraphrased in letter dated June 2, 1993, on file with

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36. Bjorn Tore Godal, quoted in "Defying Global Ban, Norway Still Hunts Whales," Chicago Tribune, February 22, 1994.

37. Responsive Management, "Americans' Attitudes Toward Animal Welfare, Animal Rights and Use of Animals," final report, October 1996.