

Animal rights groups pick up momentum

By Larry Copeland, USA TODAY

The growing influence of animal rights activists increasingly is affecting daily life, touching everything from the foods Americans eat to what they study in law school, where they buy their puppies and even whether they should enjoy a horse-drawn carriage ride in New York's Central Park.

Animal activist groups such as the Humane Society of the United States and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) say they are seeing a spike in membership as their campaigns spread.

"There's been an explosion of interest" in animal welfare issues, says David Favre, a Michigan State University law professor and animal law specialist. "Groups like the Humane Society of the United States and PETA have brought to our social awareness their concerns about animals and all matter of creatures."

"Animals are made of flesh and blood and bone just like humans," says Bruce Friedrich, PETA's vice president for campaigns. "They feel pain just like we do. Recognition of that grows year by year. The animal rights movement is a social justice movement (similar to) suffrage and civil rights."

Among other initiatives, PETA supports a measure introduced last month by a New York City councilman that would ban carriage horses that haul tourists around Manhattan. Many other cities feature such businesses.

"I think it's clear that animal issues are part of the public domain like never before," says Michael Markarian, executive vice president of the Humane Society, the largest animal welfare organization. "People have started thinking more and more about how we treat animals in our society."

Food producers say the activists aren't just concerned about animal welfare but are trying to win them the same rights as human beings.

"Ultimately, their goal is to eliminate animals being used as food," says Kay Johnson-Smith of the Animal Agriculture Alliance, an industry-supported organization that seeks to educate the public about agriculture. "There's a real danger when we allow a very small minority of activists to dictate procedures that should be used to raise animals for food."

Animal rights campaigns are moving on several fronts:

- The Humane Society says it expects 28 state legislatures this year to consider strengthening existing bans on dogfighting and cockfighting; 13 states are considering bills regulating "puppy mills," mass dog-breeding operations that keep puppies in small crates.
- Massachusetts activists are collecting signatures to get a statewide initiative on the November ballot that would ban commercial greyhound racing by 2010. The Committee to Protect Dogs says state records show that since 2002, 728 greyhounds have been injured racing at the state's two tracks.
- Over the past three years, 330 colleges have stopped or dramatically reduced the use of eggs from hens in cramped wire crates called battery cages; retailers including Burger King, Hardee's, Carl's Jr. and Ben & Jerry's now use eggs produced by cage-free hens, Markarian says.
- More than 90 American Bar Association-approved law schools now offer courses in animal law, compared with only a handful 10 years ago. Favre compares the growing interest in animal law among incoming law students to an explosion of interest in environmental law in the 1970s.

Monastery under fire

When it comes to food production and animal rights activists, even monks don't get a pass. After months of protests by PETA, the monks at Mepkin Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Moncks Corner, S.C., announced last month that they were giving up the egg production business that had sustained them for nearly 50 years.

The monks were targeted because their chickens were kept in battery cages, the nation's most common method of egg-

farming but a practice many animal rights advocates consider cruel.

Father Stan Gumula, abbot of Mepkin Abbey, said the monks were reluctant to give up the egg business. "The pressure from PETA has made it difficult for (the monks) to live their quiet life of prayer, work and sacred reading," he said.

David Martosko, director of research for the Center for Consumer Freedom, an organization supported by restaurants and food companies, says most Americans oppose cruelty to animals. But he says that activists who say animals shouldn't be eaten or used for medical research or any other purpose won't find much mainstream support.

"That is a position that very few Americans agree with," he says.

Martosko also says abandoning some current agricultural practices will drive up food prices. According to the American Farm Bureau Federation, a dozen regular eggs cost \$1.56 in mid-2007, compared with \$2.89 for cage-free eggs.

Pivotal events unfolded

Animal welfare organizations are riding a wave of popularity. The Humane Society says it has 10.5 million members or supporters, up from 7.4 million five years ago; during the same period, PETA says its rolls have doubled to 1.8 million. The groups attribute intensified public interest partly to three recent events that highlighted the vulnerability of animals:

- New Orleans residents forced to leave pets to die in 2005 when they were evacuated during Hurricane Katrina.
- The recall last year of 60 million containers of pet food after an unknown number of cats and dogs were poisoned, raising questions about pet-food safety.
- The conviction last year of Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick for dogfighting.

"Those were major events that made people realize we have so much power over animals," says Markarian of the Humane Society. "We can use that power to be cruel and indifferent, or to be kind and careful stewards."

Johnson-Smith of the Animal Agriculture Alliance says current farming practices have "a scientific basis" and "have been supported by the animal science, research and veterinarian communities."

Janet Riley, senior vice president of public affairs for the American Meat Institute, whose members produce about 95% of the beef, pork, lamb, veal and turkey consumed in the USA, says the industry is diligent in handling animals humanely. But, she adds, "people have different opinions about what constitutes humane handling."

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-01-27-animal-activists_N.htm