Animal Sanctuaries and Animal Activism
by
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"Sanctuary" is defined, in part, as a place of safety and care for creatures whose only alternative would be an unsuitable setting, suffering, or death. When sanctuary is offered to humans, it carries religious overtones. Think, for example, of the gathering place for worship within sacred architecture or of the protection provided refugees or people persecuted. Sanctuary, in short, represents safekeeping under the auspices of transcendent or ethical values.

That said, where do sanctuaries stand in the continuum of animal activism and animal rights? The minimal conception of sanctuaries is that they offer rescue and care and little more in the way of education or advocacy. At the sanctuary, protection, nurture, and respect intervene between an animal and misery or premature death.

A more expansive conception recognizes that comprehensive social change involves a triad of intervention, education, and advocacy. In animal activism, sanctuary composes the first leg of intervention. The sanctuary provides an on-the-ground fulfillment of the animal advocate’s central conviction that all life has intrinsic value. Without sanctuaries and other forms of direct animal care, the triad shrinks to a dyad, and animal activism is threatened with abstraction through an unwillingness to put its values into concrete practice. Just as one cannot legitimately "love mankind" while neglecting his suffering neighbor, we cannot love animalia while overlooking the needs of individual animals. In this way of thinking, animal rights is a single movement with many parts, many instruments, many paths to its ultimate goal. Individuals and organizations contribute to this whole so long as they attach their energies to any one or more of the triad's legs.

The Bedrock of Values and Practices
This picture of animal sanctuaries, however, remains incomplete, for even in the minimal conception they are not mere vehicles for animal rescue and venues for animal care. Sanctuaries erect themselves on a bedrock of core values and practices. At The Association of Sanctuaries (TAOS) these are expressed in this manner:

* Animals are not allowed to breed. Life in sanctuary is far better than what the animals had before they arrived, but no animal should be deliberately or inadvertently brought into the world to live in other than natural conditions for creatures of his kind. Such a diminishment of the life that evolution has prepared him for would be a disservice to the animal and contrary to the message of respect for all life that we wish to promote. Breeding new animals would also occupy already scarce space and other resources and thus be an impediment to rescuing already existing animals. Only very unusual circumstances, such as a legitimate endangered species breeding and reintroduction program, will allow an exception.

* Animals will not be used in commercial activities. They will not be bought except under very unusual circumstances, sold, traded, or hired out for entertainment or other such purposes not consistent with their natural ways. Public access is restricted and only occurs under conditions of nonintrusiveness and respect for their privacy.
* Sanctuaries accept lifetime responsibility for their resident animals. They may, when possible, be rehabilitated and released in an appropriate habitat or transferred to another sanctuary better suited to their needs. Wild animals will not be adopted but farmed or companion animals may be if standards of care are high and prohibitions on breeding and commercial activity complied with.

* Welfare of the animals is always the primary criterion for decision. Emotional, economic, or other needs of sanctuary managers and workers will not jeopardize the best interests of the animals.

Restitution and Penance
Furthermore, even when a sanctuary lacks a formal education program, it recognizes that actions speak louder than words. So it must be vigilant about the dimensions of internal consistency and thoroughgoing to ensure that all its parts reinforce its whole. Sanctuary values mandate that, to the extent possible, an animal's essential nature and proclivities be allowed to thrive. They provide for his/her social, behavioral, and emotional needs, and do not try to substitute human companionship for that of animals of their own kind.

And more: Animals will not be given demeaning names, or taught entertaining tricks, or presented to the public in unnatural or caricatured postures or garb. Public access is controlled so as not to convey that the animals are on exhibit. Sanctuaries are a kind of restitution and penance and thus will reflect the seriousness appropriate to such acts.

A Uniquely Powerful Niche
I have argued so far that sanctuaries represent an essential component of a comprehensive animal rights philosophy and practice, and secondarily that they represent an embodiment of otherwise abstract principles. I will go farther than this to say that they and other forms of direct animal care have a uniquely powerful niche to fill when they choose to fill it. Thinking of the triad of animal activism (or any activism) mentioned above—intervention, education, advocacy—we can say that one may stand on only one or two legs and still be effective, still play a vital role. But how much more powerful can an organization be when it stands on all three legs? Here is how this looks in a parallel field of social change that involved in the confrontation with child abuse:

1. Intervention includes such services as day care, foster care, halfway houses, family counseling, and support groups.
2. Education conveys practical information to struggling parents regarding child development and parental competence and to the general public to prevent and identify abusive behaviors.
3. Advocacy moves to the community and political realms to promote policy and legal changes that support families and respond to family breakdowns.

What is called a "continuum of care" within human services suggests that the more tightly interwoven these legs of the triad are, the more likely they are to deal in a timely and effective manner with the problems that brought them into existence. And further, prevention, both primary and secondary (i.e., stopping a problem from ever happening and preventing reoccurrences), and responsiveness to emergent and continuing problems are woven throughout the triad. Moving to animal rights, here is how the triad looks:
1. Intervention provides shelter and care to homeless companion animals, along with adoption and spay/neuter programs, and sanctuary for wild, exotic, and farmed animals (the last of which may also be adopted).

2. Education speaks compellingly to the public about the moral dignity and intrinsic value of all life, about the attitudes and practices that violate this value, about the needs and rights of nonhuman creatures.

3. Advocacy goes to court, joins task forces, walks the hallways of courthouses and state capitals, conducts campaigns to protect particular animals and in the process change perceptions.

**Unique Synergies**

Is it possible that animal activist organizations that embodied this "continuum of animal care" could be more powerful than when the parts operate separately?

I was once executive director of an organization that held (however precariously at times) all these dimensions under one umbrella, the Progressive Animal Welfare Society in Washington State. Through that and other experiences I have come to believe in the unique synergies available through the marriage of different roles.

* Individuals who are drawn to work in different areas are united by a commitment to animal protection and amelioration of their low status in relation to humans. At the same time they are distinguished by different practical approaches and varying philosophical conceptions. Dialogues arise, civil disagreements, debate—collegial criticism and support are offered and received to the benefit of each. As members of a single organization with multiple tasks and goals, all are enriched by the experience of pluralism.

* The actual presence of rescued animals along with the stories of their transit to sanctuary provides unique motivational impetus and help keep workers' "feet on the ground." The smell and sound of animals and the labor in caring for them help to banish abstraction and fuel pragmatism. If one source of the conflicts between animal advocates lies in the inability of our animal "clients" to speak for themselves (to tell us when we get off track), then workers' proximity to victim animals may help to sharpen senses and to hear and see messages from the wordless realms, from the actual reality of animal being, that convey direction and insight.

* The union of roles and strategies under one umbrella conveys the equal essentiality of every piece of the work to be done and promotes recognition of multiplicity-within-unity as the appropriate vision for our movement, which can then move into ever more comprehensive unities. Though often unspoken, the unity of being, the community of all life, constitutes our ultimate vision and every successful microcosm builds toward the unified macrocosm.

* Animals in sanctuary evoke public interest and concern and provide "case histories" on which to build educational and advocacy themes. They are the living, visible victims of some humans' cruelty or disregard and the beneficiaries of other humans' compassionate actions.

* One form of internal inconsistency among animal activists shows as variants of misanthropy and internecine, holier-than-thou squabbling. We are sometimes inclined to preach compassion toward every species but our own. Alternatively, working under harness to one wagon can become a laboratory for tolerance and the practice of kindness toward people in general as well as toward allies who happen to see things differently.
Certainly the vision of unity remains too little realized. But whether as parts of single organizations or as tightly joined participants in collaborative endeavors, activists working under its aegis face prospects for greater effectiveness and for modeling the comity toward which we strive, inter- and intraspecies.

**Irrefutable Witnesses**
So what do sanctuaries have to offer the cause of animal activism and the vision of unified striving? In a word, the animals. It is they who have suffered and they for whom we work. The immediacy of their presence and their individual biographical narratives exemplify the range of human potentiality, for better or worse. They are the concrete, irrefutable witnesses.

Sanctuaries at their best tell compelling stories about the dogs and cats, the cows and pigs and chickens, the cougars and wolves and monkeys who have found refuge and survived to have their tales told. Sanctuaries represent a community of species under unnatural circumstances and embody messages otherwise told mostly in words.

**Words Made Flesh**
With these thoughts in mind, a vision of an integrated social change triad based on the sanctuary with its resident animals comes into view. The animals are words made flesh and flesh translated into words. Their presence and their being have inherent power over people. Further, the stories we want to tell to change perception and behavior and the issues that we wish to build regulatory and structural changes around are rooted in these animals' experiences. Both the animal activist and those whom she aims to change are motivated by the awareness of these animals' lives and what they can be when allowed to, and what has happened that took away that allowance.

Sanctuary animals stand for all animals. Their losses cannot be wiped away (although they can be mitigated by life in the sanctuary), but they may be at least partially compensated for by their conversion into instructive examples of human behavior gone wrong and from this we may derive themes for corrective ways of being.

The sanctuary provides a model of right relations between ourselves and the rest of the animal world. When it moves out from this to focus on sources of the problems (one of whose symptoms is animals needing sanctuary) through education and advocacy, it may help create a model for more potent and united efforts for change. The dimensions of the challenge we face are immeasurable and vast, so we must be comparably creative in response.

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