

Understanding Animal Rights: The Goal is Control - Not Welfare

by Laurella Desborough, AFA Legislative Vice President

The immediate goal of the animal rights movement is control of animal issues, not the welfare of animals. Often the hook used to catch our support is the emotionally charged issue of abuse of animals or suffering of animals, and in our case, of birds. The methods used to gain control of animal issues are legislation (putting regulations in place) or lawsuits (suing to force governing officials to regulate animal use in some way).

Types of regulation include mandatory inspections of facilities, limitations placed on the number of animals that can be legally kept, restrictions or prohibitions placed on breeding of animals, and restrictions or prohibitions placed on the species which can be kept. Types of lawsuits include suits to force the exercise of laws already on the books but which may not be enforced in the specific manner which the animal rights folks desire.

In the past such lawsuits have included a suit brought against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) to require all Appendix III birds to be treated as Appendix II under the Wild Bird Conservation Act. Recently the HSUS sued the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to require them to monitor rats, mice and birds under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA).

Once we are caught on the hook of suffering or abuse, it is hard to consider why we should not support a particular law or regulation. On its surface, the issue appears clear, we need to stop the suffering. However, two aspects of laws and regulations which are often hidden are the unintended consequences and the broad reach of the specific law or regulation.

For most of us who are not experienced or educated about laws or regulations, it is difficult for us to think about how a specific regulation could have unintended consequences. It is hard for us to see how the regulation is going to have a negative effect on people who are not causing the suffering or abuse. We cannot easily understand that those who simply want to legitimately enjoy the practice of aviculture in its many forms will end up being affected by the regulation. Because the abuse issue commands our emotional response, it remains in the forefront of our thoughts, preventing us from logically addressing the other consequences of the regulation.

The Helms Amendment attached to the Farm Bill, which was recently approved by the Senate and House and probably soon to be signed into law by President Bush, is an excellent example. The emotional power of the suffering and abuse issue regarding animal use drew the support of some members of the aviculture community. They embraced the idea that rats, mice and birds should be regulated under the Animal Welfare Act. Their belief was that these creatures needed the protection of the AWA and that without such government oversight, they would forever be at the mercies of painful and abusive research experiments. While embracing this idea of preventing continued suffering of research animals, they ignored the other aspect of AWA regulation, which was the required inspection of all breeders' facilities by USDA veterinarians or USDA animal care inspectors. Concern about suffering over rode the attention to the other aspects of such regulation.

Many times laws are proposed which originate from positive intentions. When the focus is so strong on these positive intentions, all other results of the regulations become irrelevant and ignored. Then there are those who believe it when they are told that the regulation would not

actually be enforced unless there was a complaint. They also believe that the enforcers are gifted with the ability to discern the difference between good husbandry and negligent care on a wide variety of species of birds and animals. The issue of suffering or abuse outweighs all other considerations in their minds.

It is important for each of us to recognize that just because bird owners and breeders oppose a specific law, they are not ignoring abuse and suffering. There are already laws on the books to cover cruelty issues. They need to be enforced in the instances where there are abusive conditions.

If birds, rats and mice in research facilities are not receiving proper care and management, then laws designed very specifically to address those conditions should be put forward. The problem is that when any laws are put forward, the animal rights organizations work to broaden the reach of the proposed laws to cover every possible animal in every possible situation. Then it becomes necessary for the animal user groups to mount campaigns against those proposed laws. Because these proposed laws are unnecessarily broad and intrusive, they infringe upon the legitimate rights of animal owners practicing good management and providing proper care.

For individuals who do not have personal contact with animal rights believers or who have not studied the writings of animal rights leaders, it is difficult to appreciate the real intentions behind the proposed laws they support or endorse. Make no mistake, the animal rights folks have grasped that they cannot change the minds of the majority of the U.S. citizens, but that they can control those citizens' use of animals through legislation. Following is a direct quote from an animal rights activist, Volkert van der Graaf, of the Netherlands, (for more information see www.animalrights.net/articles/2002/000159.html)

"Now I'm working for Milieu Offensief (Environment Offensive) that is involved in the environment as well as animal welfare. Whatever your motives are for working here, you work together toward the same result: stopping the expansion of factory farming. The result is less pollution of the environment and less animal suffering. Through legal procedures we fight permits for factory farms and fur farms, using the law as our tool. In the past few years we have been through as much as 2000 legal procedures, we won a lot, but now we are going to apply ourselves more to the heavy offenders of environment and animal suffering."

Readers, please note the phrases... "using the law as our tool. ...we have been through as much as 2000 legal procedures..." These are the methods used by animal rights folks to gain their ends.

The well funded organizations such as HSUS, PETA and In Defense of Animals, can put forward lawsuits and lobby legislators. Without direct response from members of the animal use community, which includes aviculture, we will be at the mercy of the AR agenda.

Remember their goal is control, not animal welfare. We as the stakeholders in avicultural pursuits need to be wary of the emotional hooks of abuse and suffering when the animal rights folks put forward their legislative proposals to initiate control over our legitimate avicultural activities.

Reprinted with permission.