

Wayne Pacelle

The Vegan.com Interview

By Erik Marcus

Wayne Pacelle is a Senior Vice President with the Humane Society of the United States. He's also a vegan. This interview traces his path towards veganism and onwards into the animal rights movement. There's much discussion of state ballot initiatives, which Pacelle sees as a key entrypoint toward expanding the rights of animals.

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I think I was genetically programmed to oppose harming and killing of animals. I had no any obvious environmental influence: my home was neutral on animals. I had no family member who hunted or trapped or did anything that involved abuse of animals. But at the same time we were a normal nuclear family with meat on the table as a regular feature of our diet. We were not a shelter for animals. I often wonder what it is that make those of us who care about animals tick.

As a teenager, I often expressed concerns about animals. Many times, my friends pointed out the obvious inconsistencies in my arguments, since I professed concern for animals, but still ate them. When I went to college the weight of the inconsistency was unbearable and I became a vegetarian and then a vegan just a month later. Soon after, I started an animal rights organization at Yale called the Student Animal Rights Coalition. We had vegan meals instituted in the dining hall system for people who wanted that choice. We protested deer hunting on land the university owned in northern Connecticut, we protested needless and cruel experiments at the medical school. I was also very active in the anti-apartheid movement and we tried to get the university to divest its resources in South Africa.

Why did you choose to become involved with the Humane Society of the United States?

Out of college I became an Assistant Editor and later Associate Editor of The Animals' Agenda, the national magazine of the animal rights movement. And I also started a group in Connecticut called the Animal Rights Alliance. I ran under the green party for city council, and raised issues of animal rights during the campaign. Then I joined the Fund for Animals as National Director,

and served there for five and a half years. We did a lot of work on wildlife issues, particularly against sport hunting, and we were also in the mix on a broad range of animal issues. We did a lot of field protests against hunting where we would walk with hunters and talk with them about hunting. And in the process they were seldom able to make a kill (the distraction and six people tromping with a hunter scared away the animals). We also challenged the constitutionality of state hunter harassment laws, and there are some close parallels there with the food disparagement laws that are emerging in agricultural states.

Then I moved on to Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) in order to focus on national political organizing for animals. The HSUS is a big-tent organization, and anybody who cares about animals at any level is welcome.

How have the Humane Society's efforts regarding livestock and poultry evolved during the 1990s?

It's an issue that has to be addressed by any group that is concerned about animals, simply because more animals suffer in agricultural settings than in any other sphere. HSUS has taken the approach of challenging the intensive systems of confinement and is working to illuminate those issues for consumers. At the same time, the group is working with small farmers on a better model for food production in the United States.

Do you feel any inconsistencies as a vegan that your organization is working people who sell animals for slaughter?

Within the movement many people are at different stages in terms of their food choices. I know that in my teens I was deeply concerned about animals but was still eating animals. I think that we have to be open to people who feel that way, and try to bring them along to as compassionate a diet as they can handle.

Financially, even an organization as large as the Humane Society is seriously outgunned by the opposition. How do you expect to compete in the legislative arena against the likes of Tyson Foods and other huge meat operations, most of which give away millions of dollars a year to elected officials of both parties?

Ultimately I believe that the strength of grassroots constituency is greater than corporate donations. Politicians rely on money to get their message out but if the public is unreceptive to the message they will fail to be elected. So if enough people are concerned about animals and demonstrate that concern in the political process, then we will have material progress for animals in that arena.

Can you describe how state ballot initiatives work, and how you chose these initiatives as a focal point for HSUS campaigns?

24 states include provisions in their constitution allowing citizens to make law directly through the initiative process. Citizens gather a requisite number of signatures and secure a place on the

ballot for a measure to be approved or disapproved by voters. We believe that most people have concerns about animals and don't want them cruelly treated. They will vote to protect animals if given the opportunity.

What is your track record on past ballot initiatives?

I've had my hand in nine ballot initiatives and been fortunate enough to win eight of them. The only loss in the state of Idaho where we failed to ban spring bear hunting and baiting and hounding of bears.

Have any of these initiatives targeted food animals?

Not yet, but we are working with groups like Farm Sanctuary to examine issues that might be suitable for a statewide ballot. All of the issues we've done in the past have been on wildlife issues, but in 1998 there are three initiatives on domestic animals.

Which ballot initiatives coming up in November are you most excited about?

There are going to be six initiatives and two referenda dealing with animal issues (initiatives are when citizens gather signatures for ballot, while referenda are when legislators refer a measure to the ballot.) We expect that two anti-cockfighting initiatives in AZ and Missouri to pass handily. This will leave just three states that still allow cockfighting. We also expect passage of a measure to bar the slaughter of horses for human consumption in California.

Then there are the tougher initiatives. We will face a bitter and costly fight in California to ban trapping and poisoning of wildlife. Much of that trapping and poisoning is conducted by the agriculture industry in a war on wildlife in order to graze sheep and cattle. We will also have a very difficult fight in Ohio where we are trying to ban the target shooting of mourning doves. There are 300,000-400,000 doves shot by hunters a year since 1995 when the legislator eliminated protection for these backyard birds.

Are you seeking people to become involved in HSUS-sponsored ballot initiatives?

These initiatives fail unless people concerned about animals become involved. Tabling, hosting house parties, and distributing literature near polling sites are all essential ingredients of a successful statewide initiative. It's also a very powerful action to simply cast your vote to protect animals. We want and need people to be involved. And they can turn to us for [information on how to get involved](#).

The importance of the initiatives is not just the specific reforms that are enacted. The importance is in creating a trained network of political activists who can then initiate other reforms at the local, state, and federal levels. But the key to successful organizing is having an issue focused in order to build your grassroots infrastructure, otherwise it is extremely difficult to keep people engaged and there's nothing that will provide opportunities for political training.

Despite the gains made by the animal rights movement over the past ten years, the conditions for farm animals are clearly getting worse. In just ten years, for example, the number of chickens slaughtered each year in this country has nearly doubled. How do you hope to reverse this trend?

Human population growth is ultimately one of the most significant that we as a movement have to grapple with. It's a simple equation that more consumers translates into more animals raised for food. But I do think that people have a capacity for learning and changing their behaviors and the case for eating lower on the food chain is so overwhelming when you examine the animal cruelty, environmental, and human health components. People will continue to change their eating habits as they understand those issues. For the sake of the animals, there's nothing more powerful than changing your diet.

<http://www.vegan.com/issues/1998/oct98/pacelle.htm>