

## Comment Is Free; Reason Too Expensive

JANUARY 21, 2010

On Monday, the *Guardian* published [an opinion piece](#) by Victor Schonfeld titled, “five fatal flaws of animal activism.”

I thought the article itself had fatal flaws, and it turned out that Vegan Outreach cofounder Matt Ball disliked the piece even more than I did. Since Matt’s given a lot of study to the movement’s history and politics, I invited him to write a guest post on the Schonfeld piece. Here’s his response:

23 years after making the “The Animals Film,” Victor Schonfeld offers the *Guardian*’s “Comment is free” section “Five fatal flaws of animal activism,” showing you can always find a publisher when slamming animal rights advocates.

The contradictions in his critique are obvious. In #1, for example, he promotes the fantasy of a huge, unstoppable coalition, as though this hasn’t been the primary goal of nearly every new activist for decades on end. But in #4, his grand coalition must follow his personal “moral baseline”—vegan first, vegan only! It is a nice dream: we can all work together—just do exactly what I say!

The further irony is that his own first-hand experiences with the horror of factory farms in 1977 didn’t lead *him* to be vegan, let alone an activist. But somehow he now knows everything about advocacy, and is sure a pure vegan message is appropriate for the general public (who are actively isolated from modern agribusiness).

As much as I’d like to believe otherwise, this simply isn’t how societies change. Even if we somehow could force everyone concerned with animals to use the same tactic and message (good luck with that!), our large, diverse society will *necessarily* evolve on many different levels. We can’t ignore opportunities to reduce suffering and help society change just because a specific outcome doesn’t align exactly with our current personal belief.

Mr. Schonfeld’s last point—a lack of strategic focus for much of the activity and money related to animal concerns—has quite a bit of validity (e.g., one email plea about cats and dogs can bring in more money than Vegan Outreach’s annual budget). But it is a waste of our limited time (at best) to tilt at the windmills of different priorities. We can only do our best, based on our experiences and what resources we have.

In the end, his pessimism is undermined by an earlier throw-away comment: “But now in the 21st century supermarkets routinely cater to vegetarian food buyers, restaurant menus regularly display vegetarian symbols, and the harm to health and the global environment caused by factory farming has become established knowledge.”

So in what is, by far, the most important area of animal advocacy, those of us actually working for the animals *have* made huge, undeniable, and absolutely vital progress. That’s a fatal flaw I’ll gladly embrace.

Matt’s the coauthor of The [The Animal Activist’s Handbook](#), which I [reviewed](#) this past June. [Link](#).

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