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A pragmatic fight for animal rights

Despite criticism, we at Peta believe compromises and funny antics are necessary to the real work of animal protection

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Ingrid Newkirk
guardian.co.uk, Thursday 21 January 2010 17.00 GMT
Article history

In recent years, there has been a controversy swirling in animal rights circles, as some people such as Victor Schonfeld object to the work of groups such as Peta, which, while abolitionist and determined to get animals off the dinner plate and out of the fur farms, circuses and laboratories, have nevertheless been working with corporations to achieve animal welfare reforms within their industries. A few outspoken critics of such "half measures" or "baby steps" have gone so far as to argue against Peta's campaigns for improved slaughter practices for chickens, better living conditions for hens and larger cages for animals in laboratories. We find this attitude unhelpful to the goal of animal liberation.

Not only is it possible to work for an end to animal slavery while simultaneously supporting incremental change, moving the bar closer to that goal also seems to us to be an important step. Yes, it is more comfortable for industry and consumers alike, but short of a bloody revolution of the sort history has witnessed in other social movements, it is also nearly impossible to move a society forward in any other way. The vast majority of people, if they care about animals – and consumer surveys show that they do – support incremental improvements, even if the increments are far from wholly satisfactory to the animals, who would rather not be caged and mutilated, hung upside down and killed, and to the liberationists, who chafe at such slow progress. It seems obvious that society is more likely to progress in a way that causes particularly abusive systems to be improved or eliminated before full animal liberation is achieved.

If society's perspective is that animals should have no rights or interests at all, then moving from that mentality to complete animal liberation will require an impossibly enormous shift in viewpoint, no matter how much more enlightened this generation is than the last when it comes to understanding the complex behaviour and needs of all the various species from dog to duck. However, once society gets the picture provided by ethologists and others who study animals in nature and captivity, the interests not only of great apes and whales but also of the "humbler" species we have long taken for granted and whose fundamental interests have been totally disregarded, including chickens, pigs and other animals, will be understood and begin to be respected. That is when massive changes will come about in what we eat and wear and how we test chemicals. Not to change would be an indictment of our humanity, our societal values, ourselves. Now that some of the world's largest corporations are saying, "Yes, we understand that animals can suffer, and we see that this is a real concern," the discussion has begun in earnest.

For those who decry gradualism, the practical philosopher Peter Singer would ask, "Would you prefer to live in the horror you're in, bred to grow seven times more quickly than natural so that your bones splinter and your organs collapse, or would you prefer to be able to live without chronic pain? Would you prefer to live your life crammed into a small cage, unable to lift your wings, build a nest, or do almost anything else that you would like to do, or would you prefer to, at the very least, be able to walk? Would you prefer to be hung upside-down by your feet and then scalded to death or lose consciousness when the crate you are in passes through a controlled atmosphere stunner?" The answers should be clear.

Campaigns against the practices of fast-food chains and the campaign to ban battery cages, which have been heavily supported by the hard work of tens of thousands of grassroots activists, have improved the living and dying conditions of millions of animals. As the industries change and evolve, the improvements will apply to billions of animals every year. At Peta, we completely understand the appeal of battle cries such as "Not bigger cages – empty cages!" But giving a little comfort and stimulation for animals who will be in those cages their whole lives is worth fighting for, even as we demand those empty cages. Not only is it the best thing for the animals in the cages, it's also the best thing for animal liberation. It's a stepping stone on the road to animal liberation.

As for the sexy women in our ads, the silly costumes, the street tableaux and the tofu sandwich give-aways, in a world where people want to smile, can't resist looking at an attractive image and are up for a free meal, if such harmless antics will allow one individual to reconsider their own role in exploiting animals, how can it be faulted? Yes, Peta could restrict its activities to scientific work, but how often do you read of that in the papers? It could just hand out lengthy tracts about ethics, but how many people would stop and take one, let alone read it? Any peaceful action that opens eyes, hearts and minds should be commended, not condemned. Victor Schonfeld's film is a wonderful milestone and provides an excellent education, but there must be constant incremental daily efforts – not just big hurrahs – or we will never succeed. Too many lives depend on that success for us to be worried about how grand and perfect we are on the way to saving them.

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ABasu
21 Jan 2010, 5:08PM
Recommend? (39) Report abuse Clip | Link

Sea Kittens!

LordSummerisle
21 Jan 2010, 5:09PM
Recommend? (7) Report abuse Clip | Link

Good article, Ingrid. I can hardly believe you were responsible for the 'sea kittens' one a year ago.

JessicaReed
21 Jan 2010, 5:12PM
Recommend? (71) Report abuse Clip | Link

Ingrid

> As for the sexy women in our ads, the silly costumes, the street tableaux and the tofu sandwich give-aways, in a world where people want to smile, can't resist looking at an attractive image and are up for a free meal, if such harmless antics will allow one individual to reconsider their own role in exploiting animals, how can it be faulted?

Yeah about that - perpetuating sexist, racist and disableist cliches/actions/speech isn't really harmless in my book. It's called *perpetuating forms of oppressions*. You know, as in you're *complicit*.

But do carry on.

LavartisProdeo
21 Jan 2010, 5:14PM
Recommend? (29) Report abuse Clip | Link

> abolitionist... animal slavery

Did you see what she did there?

Silverwhistle
21 Jan 2010, 5:16PM
Recommend? (77) Report abuse Clip | Link

I find it impossible to take seriously anyone who can waffle on about "animal slavery", with a goal of "complete animal liberation". It's ludicrous anthropomorphism. There are more important causes to fight.

For example:

Human slavery still exists.

schrodingerscat
21 Jan 2010, 5:17PM
Recommend? (19) Report abuse Clip | Link

Good grief, *another* article from animal rights activists.

This is getting tedious.

monnie
21 Jan 2010, 5:19PM
Recommend? (35) Report abuse Clip | Link

I believe I'm right in saying that the majority of the population are against religious slaughter, so why does Peta find that so difficult to campaign against.

If the public are on your side, it should be easy.

Duballiland
21 Jan 2010, 5:19PM
Recommend? (53) Report abuse Clip | Link

Let's diaallow PETA members to get medical treatment from any drug tested on an animal....should resolve matters.

NapoleonKaramazov
21 Jan 2010, 5:19PM
Recommend? (7) Report abuse Clip | Link

> Despite criticism, we at Peta believe compromises and funny antics are necessary to the real work of animal protection

Like Sea Kittens?

Damn, I've be beaten to it.

shayguevara
21 Jan 2010, 5:20PM
Recommend? (25) Report abuse Clip | Link

Ah, its the Capo Di Tutti Di Pesce Gattino

My kids think PETA is run by plonkers and that there are other outfits doing the job way better but then that's kids for you., ungrateful little sods sometimes.

Littleorangedogs
21 Jan 2010, 5:21PM
Recommend? (22) Report abuse Clip | Link

Well, better they're on here spouting rubbish than out in the countryside getting in the way or digging up graves.

RapidEddie
21 Jan 2010, 5:23PM
Recommend? (60) Report abuse Clip | Link

Congratulations on missing the point by the widest of margins, Ingrid.

It isn't that the PETA stunts don't have effect such as dressing up as KKK members outside a dog show in Madison Square Gardens or - it's just that the stunts have exactly the opposite effect to that which is intended.

Typically, a PETA stunt will be seen as trivializing human suffering and showing no sense of perspective or sensitivity. It drives PETA and the whole animal rights movement to the margins. It doesn't create thought about the issues; it creates disgust about the tactics and antagonism to their aims.

But if I'm mistaken and that's what you meant to achieve all along, then keep on keeping on. At this stage, even the word 'PETA' is enough to make me eat a live mink while throwing pâté de foie gras at homeless puppies.

imogenblack
21 Jan 2010, 5:23PM
Recommend? (38) Report abuse Clip | Link

Jess says it all - Like a lot of women I know, I could be an ally of Peta but cannot get over the unhelpful way you camapign. No dice.

1nn1t
21 Jan 2010, 5:23PM
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> .., but short of a bloody revolution of the sort history has witnessed in other social movements, it is also nearly impossible to move a society forward in any other way.

There is no other way, Ingrid.

You know you're right, so just go for armed overthrow of animal oppressors now.

peterbracken
21 Jan 2010, 5:24PM
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Ms Newkirk

No right-minded person would bridle at Peta's aims to improve the conditions in which animals are farmed for slaughter. The grusome cruelty that has been exposed by animal rights organsiations rightly shames the perpetrators.

Still, your aim to 'get animals off the dinner plate' is simply ludicrous and manifestly unachievable.

And I would reason that it is the extreme campaigners and cranks among the animal rights' lobby that cause the wider public to dismiss it.

Peta is right to adopt an incremental approach to reform of the farming industry; but equally, it should junk its wilder aspirations if the serious aspects of its work are to avoid being tarred by such hopeless flights of fancy.

jearle
21 Jan 2010, 5:24PM
Recommend? (38) Report abuse Clip | Link

I've been vegetarian for periods of my life (not now, though), and my missus has been veggie since before I met her so I'm no stranger to the discussions of animal rights, but you're talking of slavery as if Animals had freedom to start with.

Fight winnable battles instead of trying to win battles you've got no hope of winning. If you suggest we eat less meat, you stand a chance. If you want us to 'free' animals from slavery, you've lost.

Adopt the language of your opponent, don't alienate them with stupid bloody sea kittens.

... having said that, I like the naked ladies because deep down, all said and done, I'm an easily-manipulated-by-sexy-chicks bloke.

NapoleonKaramazov
21 Jan 2010, 5:24PM
Recommend? (35) Report abuse Clip | Link

Joke over.

I have always believed that your organisation is paid by the American industrial ranchers association in order to discredit the animal rights movement.

Allow me to repeat. YOU ARE DISCREDITNG THE ANIMAL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND THERFORE HARMING ANIMALS

Normal people like me are willing to support reasonable animal rights.
(within the context of me being a meat eater that includes treating them humanely as possible up to the point of slaughter)
But when your lot comes along average Joes who might be sympathetic then decide that the animal rights movement is still the preserve of the lunatic fringe. The result is the animal rights movement is weaker, has less popular support, and more animals continue to be treated humanley.

For the sake of the animals Ingrid, drop the extremism.

RapidEddie
21 Jan 2010, 5:29PM
Recommend? (34) Report abuse Clip | Link

Not forgetting of course, PETA Holocaust on your plate campaign that did so much to raise awareness. Mainly awareness of the depths of stupidity PETA has sunk to. You go girl.

PJPJPJPJPJ
21 Jan 2010, 5:29PM
Recommend? (11) Report abuse Clip | Link

You're an inspiration! And because of you and issues PETA has opened my eyes to, and the investigations your courageous staff have done, I have now been vegan for 13 years. Thank you for all you do.

SPLD
21 Jan 2010, 5:31PM
Recommend? (12) Report abuse Clip | Link

I know its been done before but its worthwhile doing again onion news take on Peta sexist campaigns.

http://www.theonion.com/content/video/advocacy_group_decries_petas

Silverwhistle
21 Jan 2010, 5:31PM
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JessicaReed:

> Yeah about that - perpetuating sexist, racist and disableist cliches/actions/speech isn't really harmless in my book. It's called perpetuating forms of oppressions. You know, as in you're complicit.

It's because they despise or hate their fellow human beings and idealise animals. Most of the animal rights people I've met are damaged goods in some way. They've been disappointed in relationships or had a bad time in their families, and fixate on/identify with 'oppressed' animals rather than try to reconnect with their own species. It's not as if there's any shortage of intra-human oppression that needs to be fought - such as racism, sexism, & c.

stiltonwarrior
21 Jan 2010, 5:31PM
Recommend? (48) Report abuse Clip | Link

Nah, your a deeply despicable anti-human group who sympathise with terrorists and thugs. When it comes to animal testing, you see patients with serious illness the same way you see rodents.

That is the problem with Peta, its relationship and attittude with ALF etc. Not some boring guardianista issue with sexy posters.

FillSpace
21 Jan 2010, 5:32PM
Recommend? (9) Report abuse Clip | Link

We all have rights. But we are *all* animals, of course. And if human animals have rights why shouldn't other animals?
But, do some animals have rights that other animals do not?
Do some animals have the right to kill, whilst others do not?
Do lions and tigers have the right to kill, and also the right not to *be* killed, whilst humans have the right not to be killed, but do not have the right to kill?
Of course, I'm just a lion. What the hell do I know?

flatpackhamster
21 Jan 2010, 5:32PM
Recommend? (17) Report abuse Clip | Link

I think everyone's forgetting the important work PETA did in getting adult film star Sasha Grey to take her clothes off to advertise their campaign for animal neutering. I'm sure she's done more degrading stuff but I can't think of what it might be at the moment.

Ursi
21 Jan 2010, 5:32PM
Recommend? (24) Report abuse Clip | Link

Jessica, I'd seen the sexist and the racist adverts but never knew that Autism had been thrown into the mix.

As an organisation PETA do animal rights no service.

stiltonwarrior
21 Jan 2010, 5:33PM
Recommend? (16) Report abuse Clip | Link

> Jess says it all - Like a lot of women I know, I could be an ally of Peta but cannot get over the unhelpful way you camapign. No dice.

Im sure they are heartbroken. Self-righteous PC dullards the lot of you!

rockinred
21 Jan 2010, 5:37PM
Recommend? (19) Report abuse Clip | Link

Don't you realise how trivial and stupid you sound?

> T*oo many lives* depend on that success for us to be worried about how grand and perfect we are on the way to saving them.

Who's lives, exactly? How about putting some effort into saving lives in **Haiti** FFS? Or should I send *you* some money instead? I don't think so.

zombus
21 Jan 2010, 5:40PM
Recommend? (27) Report abuse Clip | Link

Still enjoying my sea kittens and mushy peas.

I'd trust the RSPCA to care for animals' interests far more than any of these ditzy sub-Baader Meinhof animal rights organisations.

paddybrown
21 Jan 2010, 5:43PM
Recommend? (40) Report abuse Clip | Link

Look up the episode of Penn & Teller's "Bullshit" on PETA - it should still be on YouTube. PETA are dangerous nutters, and the Guardian should be ashamed of themselves for persistently giving them a platform.

moralwreck
21 Jan 2010, 5:51PM
Recommend? (15) Report abuse Clip | Link

Sparrow hawk nabs a blackbird. Case goes to court. Will you be there to carry out the cross-examination?

or8ital
21 Jan 2010, 5:53PM
Recommend? (11) Report abuse Clip | Link

Well, I appear to be in the minority here but I'm glad PETA exists. As we continue to mercilessly exploit the planet and bleed it dry, thank you for giving the voiceless a voice.

The arrogance and selfishness of mankind never ceases to amaze me.

skipissatan
21 Jan 2010, 5:54PM
Recommend? (32) Report abuse Clip | Link

Do you know what would help PETA? If you stopped lieing in your propaganda films, stopped your members harassing and threatening harmless academics and their families, and generally behaved less like lunatics.

"Animal testing and experimentation is completely useless"- REALLY?

Theloonyfromcatford
21 Jan 2010, 5:54PM
Recommend? (19) Report abuse Clip | Link

On radio 4 once I once heard a report from a Chinese bear farm - this report disturbed me in the same way the recent news of two children attacking two children might disturb us.

There was talk of one particular bear - every time it saw the farmers coming to mess with her weeping wounds it would wet itself with fear.

Now, does PETA produce anything even as remotely disturbing and nauseating as that produced by the legions of animal abusers, advocates of animal abuse, consumers of animal abuse, defenders of animal abuse?

Quite simply: No.

No PETA advert needs defending given the current status quo of widespread, ever growing, never ending, unstoppable, in demand, widely supported, popular use and abuse of defenseless animals.

On a planet with an age of consent of 8 the NSPCC would be both widely reviled and seen as an enemy to be defeated by the millions and millions who would gain and profit from the status quo.

Animal abuse, use, suffering and exploitation = the status quo. The massive Yin. PETA (and their ilk) with their few poxy leaflets (that most "average joes" are too busy to read) and stickers = the tiny insignificant Yang.

So some PETA ads featured some naked women? Big effin' deal.

One might as well moan that the campaign for Haiti earthquake victims features photos of kids picked to tug at our heartstrings and, therefore, you ain't going to give a penny cos you resent being manipulated.

Well bully for you.

dubdubdub
21 Jan 2010, 5:54PM
Recommend? (19) Report abuse Clip | Link

No surprise to see some commentators getting more miffed about the way women are portrayed in Peta ads than about the way animals live and die.

Interesting priorities and very strange vanities ...

RapidEddie
21 Jan 2010, 5:54PM
Recommend? (18) Report abuse Clip | Link

> paddybrown said:
>
> Look up the episode of Penn & Teller's "Bullshit" on PETA - it should still be on YouTube. PETA are dangerous nutters, and the Guardian should be ashamed of themselves for persistently giving them a platform

You mean this one, Paddy?
Penn & Teller on PETA - Part 1

Penn & Teller on PETA - Part 2

Penn & Teller on PETA - Part 3

Penn & Teller on PETA - Part 4

gwillikers
21 Jan 2010, 5:55PM
Recommend? (3) Report abuse Clip | Link

I usually place the animal part of my dinner on the left of my plate... now its supposed to be on the right?????

unexceptional
21 Jan 2010, 5:56PM
Recommend? (29) Report abuse Clip | Link

Well it started well, but after reading this:

> animal slavery

I'm afraid I began to laugh and that ruined my concentration.

ngavc
21 Jan 2010, 5:58PM
Recommend? (11) Report abuse Clip | Link

In all honesty, I don't much care what you have to say. I just want to look at naked women.

That said, I love my dog. We love to eat roast beef together. The veggies just don't do it for him. Maybe we should watch your ads together.

thylacosmilus
21 Jan 2010, 5:58PM
Recommend? (18) Report abuse Clip | Link

skipissatan:

> "Do you know what would help PETA? If you stopped lieing in your propaganda films, stopped your members harassing and threatening harmless academics and their families, and generally behaved less like lunatics."

Agreed.

And it'd help a lot if they stopped killing animals ***themselves***...

dubdubdub
21 Jan 2010, 6:00PM
Recommend? (3) Report abuse Clip | Link

@FillSpace

There are no rights.

People pretend there are rights, like they pretend there is a God or there isn't a God or that democracy is a good thing or that men and women should be equal etc.

jeringa
21 Jan 2010, 6:01PM
Recommend? (14) Report abuse Clip | Link

@RapidEddie

> But if I'm mistaken and that's what you meant to achieve all along, then keep on keeping on. At this stage, even the word 'PETA' is enough to make me eat a live mink while throwing pâté de foie gras at homeless puppies.

Couldn't agree more.

I used to think that if the "Left wing, limp wrist'd, crystal rubbing, tree hugging freaks" wanted to Paint themselves blue, run naked in forests & hug lumber; then that was just fine by me, as long as they don't demand that I join in.

They're now demanding we all join in
Animal Slavery? WTF?
Tell ya what, the first beef to walk into a court of law & demand equal rights, then fine
Till then ... Vegetables are not food, Vegetables are what food eats :)

RapidEddie
21 Jan 2010, 6:02PM
Recommend? (33) Report abuse Clip | Link

> Theloonyfromcatford said:
>
> No PETA advert needs defending given the current status quo of widespread, ever growing, never ending, unstoppable, in demand, widely supported, popular use and abuse of defenseless animals.

Two questions for you. In light of what you say, do you think that it was fair of PETA to compare the suffering of animals to the Jewish Holocaust and secondly, do you think campaigns such as this actually advance the causes they espouse?

nullper
21 Jan 2010, 6:02PM
Recommend? (3) Report abuse Clip | Link

Maybe PETA should start genetically mutating animals to have oppsable thumbs so they can start using tools, or become sewer dwelling ninjas... you know what ever

dave24
21 Jan 2010, 6:02PM
Recommend? (31) Report abuse Clip | Link

@dubdubdub

> No surprise to see some commentators getting more miffed about the way women are portrayed in Peta ads than about the way animals live and die.
>
> Interesting priorities and very strange vanities ...

Funny how some people put the rights of animals above finding cures for human diseases. Interesting priorities......

@unexceptional

> Well it started well, but after reading this:
>
> animal slavery
>
> I'm afraid I began to laugh and that ruined my concentration.

You did well. I couldn't get past "abolitionist" myself.

Danot
21 Jan 2010, 6:03PM
Recommend? (24) Report abuse Clip | Link

> Yes, it is more comfortable for industry and consumers alike, but short of a bloody revolution of the sort history has witnessed in other social movements

to be honest, I don't think that history has ever seen the likes of a bloody revolution led by anorexic looking hippies against meat eaters. I'm guessing that it wouldn't last very long, and wouldn't go well for the vegis.

> not only is it possible to work for an end to animal slavery

Here's the bit where you keep getting it wrong. Animals aren't humans, they aren't as important as humans and they never will be. Comparing human slavery with animal husbandry is grossly offensive to the vast majority of people. That's why you people are ridiculed in the media.

I was going to have a jacket potato with cheese. But after reading that rubbish it's KFC for me tonight.

MrJoe
21 Jan 2010, 6:05PM
Recommend? (12) Report abuse Clip | Link

> As for the sexy women in our ads, the silly costumes, the street tableaux and the **tofu sandwich** give-aways

Tofu? If I wanted to convince someone that there's no reasonable alternative to meat, I'd feed them tofu.

stiltonwarrior
21 Jan 2010, 6:07PM

This comment has been removed by a moderator. Replies may also be deleted.

stiltonwarrior
21 Jan 2010, 6:09PM
Recommend? (5) Report abuse Clip | Link

> Two questions for you. In light of what you say, do you think that it was fair of PETA to compare the suffering of animals to the Jewish Holocaust and secondly, do you think campaigns such as this actually advance the causes they espouse?

Because he is either ignorant, as usual, or he thinks Jews are of about the same worth as chickens.

1nn1t
21 Jan 2010, 6:09PM
Recommend? (7) Report abuse Clip | Link

> thylacosmilus 5:58PM
>
> And it'd help a lot if they stopped killing animals themselves...

Thanks for this link:
http://www.petakillsanimals.com/petarebuttal.cfm where we read of the PETA animal 'shelter':

> Since 1998, PETA has transferred a total of 130 animals to other shelters, and 21 of them were chickens. By comparison, it killed over 10,000 animals.

According to PETA:
"[M]ost of the animals we receive are broken beings for whom euthanasia is, without a doubt, the most humane option."

BellaM
21 Jan 2010, 6:12PM
Recommend? (34) Report abuse Clip | Link

From Wiki:

> PETA is against the no kill movement and euthanizes most of the animals surrendered to them. In 2005, PETA euthanized 1,946 companion animals in Virginia, out of 2,138 animals (or 91%) surrendered to them or picked up as strays. During the same year, 126,797 animals, out of 228,376 animals (or 55%) surrendered or picked up as strays, were euthanized at animal shelters in Virginia.

Also, is this true?

> PETA?s Animal Record report for 2008, filed with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, shows that the animal rights group killed 95 percent of the dogs and cats in its care last year. During all of 2008, PETA found adoptive homes for just seven pets.

If so, I'm not sure what any animal lover is doing supporting your campaigns.

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