The Animal Rights 2008 National Rights Conference

August 16-18, 2008
Washington, DC
The Animal Rights 2008 National Rights Conference was held at the Hilton Mark Center in Alexandria, Va. from August 14 -18. There were an estimated 400 attendees, the majority of whom were Caucasian. There were a few people of color and the ages ranged from early 20s to 75 or older.

**General observations:**
Conference groups were divided according to tactics. Some groups thought violence undermines the entire movement, while others thought it was essential and effective. The incidents over the past few months at the UC Santa Cruz were mentioned only in passing. Remarks by speakers indicated that the organizers and attendees were aware that the FBI may have been in attendance.

Although not advertised in the program, Jerry Vlasak attended the conference and was present in the North American Animal Liberation Front Press Office (NAALFPO) booth in the exhibit hall.

**Friday, August 15th:**

**Session: Applying Direct Action**
The panelists discussed the importance of direct action, but were conflicted about what tactics to use. Some felt violence undermines the credibility of the animal activist movement, while others believed it was effective and necessary.

**Jonny Vasic (Sea Shepherd Conservation):**

Vasic believes in non-violence, but says economic damage is permissible. Vasic said, “Non-violence does not mean non-action.”

He also emphasized the power of one; everyone can act to make a difference for good. According to Vasic, the number one most important thing you can do for the planet is to adopt a vegan lifestyle.

Poverty is an underlying barrier to the animal rights movement because those who are poverty stricken cannot care about animal rights - they are more concerned with getting a meal that day, not whether it is cruelty-free. We must solve poverty issues in order for the animal rights movement to progress.

**Camille Hankins (Win Animal Rights, ALF spokesperson):**

Hankins says direct action is not always property destruction and bombs, but those tactics are effective. In the UK and abroad, direct action is different and effective. She was in the UK when DHL vans were firebombed and she was pleased, she said.

She stated that rallying to socialize on Fur-Free Friday isn’t going to make those who abuse animals feel the pain. She claimed consistency is the key to success and that digging up graves in England was necessary and the reason Newchurch guinea pig farm went out of business.
She was pleased with the UC Santa Cruz news coverage. Then she stressed that there is no proof that the UC Santa Cruz bombings were ALF. Hankins said that “Dario Ringach is our biggest success” because he shows that “[fire bombs, home harassments and threats] are successful in getting researchers to abandon their work.”

Hankins condemned activists who use press to disagree with other activists’ tactics. She believes they cannot use press opportunities to condemn other activists’ tactics. Instead, she said to use media opportunities to talk about issues: animals are dying and that should be the focus. Hankins says they might not agree on tactics but it is counter-productive to the whole movement to use airtime to condemn the other activists’ tactics.

She believes education and legislative efforts are important. Hankins urges the crowd to push themselves beyond their comfort levels. When she mentioned that the ALF had never harmed a single person and they call ALF terrorists, someone in the crowd said, “No one has been killed….yet” and the crowd applauded and cheered.

Session: Enacting Protective Laws
Three speakers spoke extensively on the legislative process, but little was of relevance to animal research.

However, when a question was raised in the Q&A session about the possibility of reversing the AETA, the panel replied that Equal Justice Alliance is talking to Congress and that their goal was to pass positive legislation because Congress won’t reverse the AETA. They stated that most congressional reps have never even heard of it and it won’t be reversed until they realize how bad it is.

Session: Abuse of Animals for Science
Camille Hankins opened the session by commenting that they are doing very well in getting dissection laws to ban dissection in high schools and that they are doing very well on the cosmetic testing front.

Video from Oregon:
A video was shown that Matt Rossell (In Defense of Animals) filmed at the Oregon National Primate Research Center. It included information Matt learned about the Animal Welfare Act and multiple videos he filmed at the lab in the 2 years he worked there and videotaped. The video featured Matt Rossell, Dr. Jane Goodall, and Dr. Iris Johnson-Brown.

Q&A:
After the video an audience member asked, “What can I do?” Matt encouraged people that work inside the labs to speak out. He spoke positively of leafleting outside the labs and said that the leaflets often get put up on bulletin boards inside the labs.

An audience member mentioned that she worked as a nurse in Chicago and knew there was an animal research facility near her office, but said “nobody wants to talk about it.” Camille Hankins stated that “transparency is the thing these people are most afraid of.” And “you’ve got researchers all over the world doing the same research” and because they don’t communicate, the experiments are needlessly redone. She mentioned that the recent Santa Cruz attacks have
generated a lot of media attention that they wouldn’t have had otherwise and stated that she and Jerry Vlasak, the other press officer for the NAALFPO, always try to focus the attention onto the animals.

Rossell discussed the ability of activists to utilize the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Public Records Act, commenting that they supplied a lot of the information that he uses. He said that the trouble they are seeing is universities are forcing them into the courtroom to get the records but stated that eventually they almost always prevail. He stated that the universities are willing to pay thousands of dollars in legal fees because it is worth that much to them.

Hankins mentioned activist Michael Budkie of Stop Animal Exploitation Now (SAEN), who did not attend the conference, and Rossell agreed that he is a great resource. Camille stated that a lot of the pictures and info they have obtained over the years came from people who wore masks and broke into facilities in the dead of night. Rossell commented that most of the video that he shot was done with a small video camera that he could carry in his pocket and stated that he rarely had to use a concealed camera.

Session: Confronting the Corporate Threat

The first two speakers spoke primarily against agribusiness and corporations that are bad for the environment.

Camille Hankins began her speech by stating that “we cannot underestimate the corporate threat, we cannot underestimate their power.” She said, “we got (sic) to quit calling it the pharmaceutical industry, it is a drug industry…They are using words to convince us.” She mentioned that NIH is using our tax dollars to run webinars teaching people how to deal with “us.” She mentioned the “I Control Wall Street” ad that was published in the New York Times last year and stated that activists are using financial records and other industry methods to learn how these companies operate. She mentioned the effectiveness of the SHAC campaign and said that other companies have rallied around HLS to keep them from failing because they are the “line in the sand.” She mentioned the effectiveness of attacking secondary targets.

Saturday, August 16th

Session: Supporting Fellow Activists

Camille Hankins (WAR, ALF):

Hankins told the audience that they need to practice proper security measures protests. She said that animal rights is a movement that is constantly under scrutiny by the government and by corporations, many of which are “in bed” with the government. In New York City, the police will use a good cop/ bad cop strategy, but don’t be fooled by the good cops, Hankins says. She said they would try to relate to you and get you to talk; they will say they are interested in becoming vegan, but “believe me, they are not your friends.”

Hankins stressed practicing good security measures. She recommends PGP (Pretty Good Privacy) inscription software for emails. She uses PGP for every single email she sends. She recommends it for other activists and says they can get a copy of it at one of the booths. It’s not
foolproof, she says, but it’s like sealing an envelope so no one can read it. Don’t put anything illegal in an email.

**Peter Young (The New Ethic, and former ALF prisoner):**

Young discussed being in prison for two years. He said he was very well supported by activists when he was there. He wanted everyone to think about the return on investment when supporting prisoners. If we all know we will take care of each other when we’re in prison, then we won’t be afraid to do the things that will send us to prison, Young says. And then he mentioned a Web site of eco-prisoners: [www.ecopruners.org](http://www.ecopruners.org)

Young went on to provide a list of things that people can do to support activist prisoners, including sending vegan food, letters and books. Young would have traded every letter, book, visit and phone call for more ALF actions dedicated to him while he was in prison. That’s what mattered most to him.

**Q&A:**

During the Q&A session, Hankins recommended the National Lawyers Guild as a resource and to get a legal observer at all your protests to be the intermediary between activists and the police. She also encouraged everyone to know their civil rights and the “rules of engagement.”

**Session: Running a Campaign**

The first two speakers spoke generally on running campaigns, including having goals and sound bites.

Camille Hankins gave an overview of the effectiveness of the SHAC campaign, starting in England. First, they identified the tertiary targets. Then they read the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, and the HLS annual report to identify their support system. Then they began to target the following:

1) Banks – They went after banks first. Now there is not one bank in the world that will give HLS a bank account. Their bank is England.
2) Insurance Companies – Marsh stopped doing business with them and no other companies will insure them
3) CPA Firms – None of the big six will work for HLS.
4) Security companies

She reminded all to make sure they have the resources to execute the campaign. She told people to go after suppliers. She said that Staples has been a great target because they are highly visible, since they are in many locations, which gives the activists a chance to engage the public and has given the movement resurgence.

She then went on to explain WAR’s new campaign, Operation IX3, which stands for Institutional Investor Insanity). Their plan is to target investors in pharmaceutical companies and do aggressive home demos. She claims the investors have written her after a home demo to thank her and said the home demo prompted them to investigate HLS and they saw the cruelty and decided to get out of business with them.
Session: Conducting Investigations

The first two speakers focused mostly on agricultural issues, but Nathan Runkle of Mercy for Animals did mention the importance of knowing the taping and privacy laws of your state and mentioned that the Reporters Committee for the Freedom of the Press is a great resource for finding out local taping laws.

Matt Rossell of IDA discussed how he became an undercover investigator by chance when he was a security guard and came across a feline research lab and called PETA. He mentioned that he has been in lots and lots of infiltrations in labs, slaughterhouses, farms, and circuses. He spent more than two years at the Oregon National Primate Research Center and stated that these undercover investigations are the backbone of what activism is about, and he encouraged people to think about becoming infiltrators.

Q&A:

An audience member asked about the legal consequences and the AETA consequences of undercover investigations since it has become a federal crime to take a picture inside of an animal facility?

Runkle responded by stating that the AETA is the reason that they switched from open investigations (breaking in and taking pictures) to employment investigations so that they weren’t breaking any laws. He said that he researches with his attorneys the laws before beginning any investigations.

Session: U.S. Animal Protection Laws

Much of the discussion here was focused on agricultural issues, but one speaker did pass around an AWA handout, reminding people that the AWA does not cover rats, mice, or birds, in research or rodeos. The speaker, Janet Enoch of SHARK, claimed that the USDA investigators are not doing their jobs. They only work 1 or 2 hours a day and go home or go fishing for the rest of the day. She stated that they try to get media attention whenever possible and have over 72 videos on YouTube that get over 12,000 hits per day.

Q&A:

One audience member urged the enlistment of law schools to help get the animal laws enforced. She mentioned the Moot court competitions at GW and other schools about the constitutionality of AETA.

Session: Vivisection Campaigns

Matt Rossell (In Defense of Animals):

Rossell started off the session by asking for a show of hands for who is actively involved in anti-vivisection campaigns. About 6 people raised their hands. He stated that “progress is being made.” He mentioned IDA’s Fetal Nicotine Campaign and encouraged people to visit the campaign Web site. He also commented on the Great Ape Protection Act and encouraged all the people to contact their representatives mentioning that the CHIMP act didn’t go far enough. He
mentioned the success of the IDA legal campaigns, mentioning how Eric Kleiman helped to shut down the Coulston Foundation.

He mentioned how they were successful in getting a prosecutor to press charges against those responsible for the deaths of 3 chimps in the Alamogordo Primate Facility. He mentioned that they were still trying to get the records of the chimps in the facility and was pressuring Charles River Laboratories for more information as well.

**George Guimaraes (VEDDAS):**

Guimaraes spoke about the anti-research campaigns in Brazil. Brazil has a federal law 9605/1998 that makes animal research a criminal offense (animal abuse) if an alternative exists. The law is clear but it is not enforced. There has only been one successful case since the law was enacted in 1998. They are working to educate people at the grassroots level, educate lawyers, and work with the media.

**Camille Hankins (WAR, ALF):**

Hankins gave an update on the SHAC campaign and said that the industry is so afraid of the activists that they (industry) have representatives here spying on them and they welcome them but when the activists go to scientific conferences, they kick them out.

**Session: History of Activist Repression**

**Heidi Boghosian (National Lawyers Guild):**

Boghosian discussed how the government suppresses us: passing laws that violate the 1st amendment, government infiltration, and creating list of enemies that they now call terrorists. She claimed the heavy handed government response to the Oklahoma City bombing and the broadened definition of terrorism lead to the passage of the AETA.

**Will Potter (Green is the New Red):**

Potter is an activist who testified before Congress two years ago opposing AETA and runs the blog The Green Scare. Potter’s main focus was on how the government uses fear to silence people. He explained that the three basic ways the government oppresses activism are legal, legislative, and extralegal. He gave an example of legal as being the SHAC terrorism charges and Operation Backfire cases, where, he claims, the government used terrorism enhancement provisions that had a huge influence on the sentences. Legislation would be things like the AETA, which expanded on the AEPA. Extralegal would be the media smear campaigns.

**Q&A:**

An audience member asked: Hasn’t our movement gotten to the point where we don’t need to be covert and do illegal actions?

Patrice Jones (*Eastern Shore Sanctuary*) – “No, we need both.”

Potter – “I agree with Jones. Pressure is being put on both the above and below ground activists.”

Boghosian – “SHAC-7 didn’t do anything illegal and a jury convicted them.”
**Session: Current Activist Repression**

Heidi Boghosian (National Lawyers Guild):

Boghosian outlined the current tools of oppression she claims the government uses: Destructive device and terrorism enhancements, names in shared databases, use of the label terrorist, calling civil disobedience domestic terrorism, police arrests without probable cause, and police perjury. She said that city, state and local governments are passing new legislation that allows the police to track activists and political protestors even if they have committed no crime. She claims that this has had a chilling effect on free speech and states that it is unconstitutional. She said that protests are more likely to become violent if police show up in riot gear and police are trying to incite animal rights protestors.

Odette Wilkins (Equal Justice Alliance and former corporate attorney):

Wilkens mentioned that she just joined the animal rights movement two years ago. The Equal Justice Alliance is committed to reversing the AETA. She delineated the problems she has with the AETA: it is vague, the term “interfering” is used but never defined, it creates disproportionately harsh penalties, the two acts don’t have to be by the same person, and that the person who posts information on the Internet can be held under AETA if a third party uses the information to commit a crime against an animal enterprise. Currently 36 states have AETA-type laws in place at the state level and the Equal Justice Alliance will be putting them on their Web site soon. She mentioned that California is currently trying to pass an AETA-like law. In June, IDA and the Equal Justice Alliance met with California state legislators and worked to get the language weakened, but since the Santa Cruz attacks, it has been revived. If the Equal Justice Alliance can get enough support, they intend to introduce legislation next year to try and reverse the AETA.