

## Direct Actions Speak Louder than Words

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From 1985 to 1995 I was a member of the Animal Liberation Front. In 1999 I completed a 57-month prison sentence for my participation in a 1992 raid on Michigan State University's Furbearer Research Facility, where 32 years of research intended to benefit the fur farm industry was destroyed by fire and two mink from an experimental fur farm were rescued. As a former participant and continuing supporter of the ALF's campaign of nonviolent direct action, I would like to respond to accusations that the ALF is a violent terrorist organization.

Some critics within the animal rights movement argue that actions by the ALF set back our struggle rather than propel it forward. This claim is made despite the fact that after 19 years of direct action the ALF has rescued tens of thousands of animals that would have certainly been slaughtered and cost their abusers tens of millions of dollars through the destruction of property such as computers and lab equipment. In 1984 the ALF's raid on the University of Pennsylvania's Head Injury Laboratory began a series of events that led to its closure. In 1991 I led an ALF attack on Oregon State University's Experimental Fur Farm, a facility that had served the fur industry for over 60 years. In addition to setbacks to ongoing research, the facility, unable to recover from the incursion, was forced to close. In 1997 an ALF foray into the Cavel West horse slaughterhouse led to its permanent closure. Another clear example of the ALF's ability to reduce animal suffering is Operation Bite Back. Between 1995 and 1999, after over 50 raids on fur farms, illegal releases led to the closure of at least a dozen targeted mink and fox farms. In 2001 the ALF demonstrated the effectiveness of a campaign of economic sabotage when it targeted the Coulston Foundation, the single largest chimpanzee research laboratory in the country. Already in dire financial straits, the ALF's September arson

attack caused \$1 million in non-recoverable damages and helped push the already troubled lab one step closer to shutdown.

Even targeted vivisectors themselves—such as those at the University of Arizona, where a 1989 ALF raid torched two research laboratories and rescued 1,200 animals—admit to the effectiveness of direct action. Following the action, animal research at the university fell under greater scrutiny. Vivisectors reduced the number of animals sacrificed in redundant experiments and were forced to address charges of animal abuse claimed by the ALF. All of these achievements were accomplished without harm. And we're supposed to believe these concrete victories to be counterproductive to the goals of animal liberation?

In all struggles for liberation from oppression there are segments that will accept compromises that leave the oppressed behind. These are often the same people who condemn those who engage in sabotage and are unwilling to compromise for crumbs from the oppressor's table. The ALF is forced through the ineffectiveness of the means of change offered by our allies and the animal exploiters alike to engage in a campaign that subverts the law yet adheres to the ALF's principles of nonviolence. While some in the animal rights movement may still believe that passive resistance and Gandhian tactics will reverse the lack of morality among the world's most powerful industries and governments, the ALF abandons this naiveté. The escalation of institutional animal exploitation in this last century continues, as abusers are guided by profit, not moral imperatives. The laws of capitalism dictate that as long as there is money to be made through the continued destruction of the animal world and earth, industry and government will conspire to allow this, despite legitimate protests and with total disregard for the consequences for future generations.

The ALF thereby is forced to operate in the real world; it is not extremist but rather pragmatic. If the abusers and destroyers of the earth's future care only about money, and cannot be swayed by mass protests or legal pressure, then we must drive a stake through their economic heart. In a campaign of economic sabotage, pressure must be levied against the oppressor until continued exploitation and abuse is no longer profitable. For the billions of animals held captive still, this remains our greatest weapon. Property destruction and sabotage are bludgeons that do not target living sentient beings, but rather the very machinery and tools used to destroy their lives.

The ALF, as the underground army of the animal rights movement, has for years fought to end war, not perpetuate it. With great pain, we

have looked into the eyes of our animal relations in the laboratories and fur farms. We are the few from our side who have seen firsthand the torture inflicted on beings who were once our friends and companions. We have been the ones who, while rescuing a few, have had to leave thousands more behind. Once you have witnessed the callousness of animal exploiters, all arguments rationalizing a less aggressive strategy in the hopes of far-off victory remain a betrayal of those we claim to love and represent. To those animals suffering today as we debate the many ways in which our movement helps them, surely we should be able to agree that immediate liberation and a reduction in suffering whenever possible is a good thing to support and even encourage.

Many critics argue that the ALF should replace illegal direct action with more "moderate" political means. Yet the fact remains, as evidenced by almost all human liberation struggles, that both strategies—methods that work inside and outside the system—not one in exclusion of the other, are capable of coexisting for the greater good. We need not eliminate any of the diverse methods that bring about victory for animals. No one tactic alone in our nonviolent arsenal is adequate, and no one strategy stands to suffer because of the existence of the other. Greater harm is done to our movement, and to the animals, when we resist the positive benefits that come from a harmony of all tactics in our common strategy towards animal liberation.

In questioning ALF strategies as "extreme" measures, we suggest that the animals the ALF saves are not valuable enough to warrant extra-legal means of alleviating their pain. Thus we demonstrate a unique form of speciesism. The ALF instead recognizes a worldview that sees a brother- and sisterhood with all life and in doing so answers the calls on our hearts to protect those we are honored to represent. When a moral people embrace the belief that all life is sacred and deserving of worth unto itself, the laws of society historically will contradict and criminalize the moral obligations and actions of such people. Bound not by the laws of society and capitalism, but by the laws of nature and morality, the ALF remains an easy target for those eager to assign the labels of "criminal" and "terrorist." When we as co-inhabitants of earth are against such odds, it becomes impossible to turn away from the guerrilla tactics that have brought about victory here and now for our nonhuman constituents.

The question the animal rights movement should ask itself is: What course of action would we justify and engage in if it was our own mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and children in the torture chambers and not nameless, unfamiliar animals? And also: Is the ALF justifiable

in its own moderate choice of tactics? Once we answer these questions honestly we might better appreciate that in over 19 years of operation in the US, the ALF has yet to cause physical injury or loss of life in a campaign that has achieved liberty for tens of thousands of the voiceless victims of humanity's war against the animal nations. Meanwhile, corporate, governmental, military and private animal abusers remain committed to their own code of real violence and terror, as evidenced by their contemptuous disregard for all other life on earth.

Still, the ALF is not only a freedom-fighting force for animals, but also a voice for the larger animal rights movement. Without the support of countless individuals who help find homes for rescued animals and finance the ALF's campaign, we would cease to exist. When the majority of those in the animal rights movement who provide such support deem ALF actions no longer necessary or counterproductive to the goals of animal liberation, our actions will end. This is the flaw in the thinking of the law enforcement agencies whose mandate it is to destroy us. No underground struggle can survive without aboveground support. It remains difficult if not impossible to believe that animals and our movement would be better off without the ALF. Without question, more animals are alive and living in peace today because of the ALF's campaign.

In fairness to those who accuse the ALF of terrorism, let us ask what constitutes violence, and whether defense against violence is ever justified. Does the decommissioning of weapons of mass destruction constitute the same level of violence as their use against innocent victims? The Nuremberg Trials accused those aware of Nazi atrocities with gross apathy and inaction. Will our generation one day be questioned as to why we did not take greater action to stop the violence that engulfs the world of animals on earth? Do we who are aware of the danger and consequences facing life on earth bear any of the moral responsibility for failing to prevent it, our only excuse being that to act differently would violate the laws of rich men and jeopardize our own freedom?

The animal rights movement has long explained our moral obligation to prevent the suffering of animalkind with words, while being quick to judge the ALF, who demonstrate that commitment with action. These actions may be illegal from the vantage point of an ecocidal and genocidal property system, but they most certainly are not immoral or unjustified according to the register of higher ethical norms. Adherence to the principles of nonviolence practiced by the ALF requires that our actions be less passive and more aggressive. ALF

tactics are applied when all other avenues of change have proven ineffective. Such a strategy is in accordance with Gandhi's principles of *satyagraha* or truth-action, which never condemned the destruction of property. In 1942 India's Independent Congress, of which Gandhi was a founder, openly advocated acts of sabotage to British railways. According to Gandhi himself and his biographer Yogesh Chadra, during World War II Gandhi thought of forming a national militia as well as resorting to guerrilla warfare to combat Japanese aggression. "It is better to fight than be afraid. It is better to indulge in violence than to run away," responded Gandhi when questioned about his own participation in the Boer War and WWII.<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi's principles of nonviolence formed merely one strategy employed by India's independence struggle, yet they are often cited as a successful example of the power of nonviolence. Only someone unfamiliar with India's history would believe passive nonviolence to be solely responsible for India's independence. Such arguments fail to recognize the value illegal direct action plays in a liberation struggle. They also perpetuate the myth that as long as we adhere to our moral and ethical principles, we will be rewarded. In doing so, proponents of passive nonviolence exercise a choice of tactics that is the product of privilege and only available to those in the First World. This privilege itself is the product of the violence committed to create the so-called "liberties" the United States government promotes. The ALF was not created as a matter of choice, but of necessity. Only because of the lack of a truly democratic society that reflects the public's support for humane treatment of animals is the ALF forced to illegal means. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela aptly states, "It is not the oppressed who determine the means of resistance, but the oppressor."<sup>2</sup>

Our opponents should remain grateful that the ALF is committed only to the destruction of property and rescue of prisoners and refrains from directing physical violence toward them, however morally justifiable it might be when preventing a greater act of violence. Reflecting Gandhi's own strategic understanding of the necessity of remaining flexible in determining a movement's tactics, the ALF believes its actions to be a contemporary incarnation of *satyagraha*, a response to the ever-growing institutional violence in our dominant society. Only when there is disregard for the issues raised through passive nonviolent civil disobedience does aggressive nonviolent uncivil disobedience become justified as it now is.

Another strategic mistake for which the ALF often is criticized is the apparent disregard for the consequence of negative publicity that fol-

lows some ALF actions. Unlike those elements of the animal rights movement whose strategy is dependent on media publicity, the ALF's is determined by one thing alone: how to cause as much disruption as possible to systems of animal abuse and rescue as many of the prisoners as possible without the slightest risk of harm to life itself. ALF actions are most effective when greater attention is given to their impact on the abuser rather than the media those actions will generate.

The ALF believes today's mainstream media corporations to be an extension of the animal abuse industries they represent through advertising and ownership. If truth and morality were the driving forces behind mainstream journalism, then the violent actions of industry and government would be reported as the real terrorism that they so often are. Instead, the corporate media establishment maintains a general condemnation of illegal forms of resistance in the hopes that the public will also label such acts terrorism. Protecting the economic interests of their advertisers and owners helps maintain the status quo, in which animals and the earth are private property, not entities unto themselves. The formulation of our movement's methods of resistance should not be determined by any perception the public or media has of the ALF, but rather by the ability to deliver concrete results that bring us closer to animal liberation. Pursuing a strategy that hopes to appeal to the morality of those who rarely demonstrate any is noble, but it should not be at the expense of tactics that for years have brought victory for animals.

The ALF has never endorsed or participated in physical violence and never will. Our 19-year record of no injuries or deaths is no coincidence. It is the product of a determined nonviolent underground movement sincerely committed to alleviating physical violence—not rationalizing it, as our opponents regularly do. The ALF has always been grounded in such a reverence and respect for life that in the course of every ALF action that I participated in, our members were ready to sacrifice their own freedom and even life in the hopes of protecting the lives and liberty of those animal nations we represent.

Far from compromising the principles of nonviolence, the ALF's actions have and always will be those of a highly moral and disciplined group of compassionate individuals whose efforts would be hypocritical if they ever sanctioned physical violence as our opposition does. Those in industry and government can rest assured that in the coming years the ALF will continue to exist to provide an avenue of freedom for those innocent victims the animal rights movement is unable to rescue legally. The ALF brings hope when others feel hopeless. For the

peaceful warriors of the ALF, nonviolent direct action to save lives remains not a choice, but the obligation of every enlightened human being.

### Notes

1. Gandhi, Mohandas K. *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).
2. Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk To Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994).