

"Alert Status Red:" Animal Law Conference a Success

Written by

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PEJ News - Julie Muir: Where could you go to think about Aboriginal interests in the context of animal rights, PETA's controversial use of scantily-clad women in ads, and militancy and animal advocacy in the "age of Eco-Terrorism"? All these issues and more were explored in fascinating detail at the Second Annual UVic Animal Law Conference in Victoria last Friday. My only real complaint is that the 7-hour conference was still too short!

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Julie Muir, PEJ News

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You know you've been to a successful event when people are wishing it could have lasted longer, with time to sort through with other participants the knowledge you've absorbed. In fact, the second annual conference on animal rights and the law was excellent, lacking only the means for conference-goers to connect and build greater community to last us until the next one. Despite somewhat of a lack of publicity, attendance was solid at about 60 people. The lecture room was comfortable and high-tech, and at lunch-time, the mountains of sushi, roasted vegetables, stuffed pastries and other vegan delectables catered by the university were scarfed down gratefully by attendees. The speakers ranged in experience from thesis students to seasoned activists to lawyers and law professors, and though the range of topics they covered were diverse, it seemed that common themes were echoed and reinforced throughout the day's presentations.

One theme played on the idea of "interlocking oppressions" - that it's not just the abuse of animals which concerns us, but a whole system built upon exploiting the environment, animals, and other humans - a system which perpetuates domination across all spheres. Amber Prince, a masters Law student, addressed the conflict between animal activists and Aboriginal interests

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in Canada, pointing out that the animal rights movement can at times be insensitive towards a population that is the country's most economically and socially vulnerable. To recognize "interlocking oppression" means activists need to understand that Aboriginal people have been victimized by the same structures and economic forces that are so destructive and cruel to animals, instead of painting them as the enemy for their continued reliance upon animal products.

Prince urges activists to become more educated about Aboriginal culture, whose subsistence use of animals over thousands of years has built up a complex relationship bounded by rules and ceremonies and pregnant with social meaning. A culture that views animals as equal, non-human persons and venerates them as literal ancestors has much to teach the animal rights movement, which should try to build common ground with Aboriginal communities and to aid them with their own struggles. Though Prince leaves space for criticism of practices such as leg-hold traps or hunting endangered species, animal activists' fight should be against animal industries, where animals are violently degraded and viewed as "production units" or "models" for scientific research. Prince's fresh perspective, as a vegetarian from an Aboriginal community, was a unique contribution to the conference.

Another example of "interlocking oppression" drove Maneesha Deckha's presentation, in which she explored the problematic imagery which the large animal rights group PETA has been using to further their cause. Deckha showed us ads where white, pretty, skinny women holding fluffy white bunnies posed naked with slogans such as, "I'd rather bare my BUNS than wear fur!" Black men and women pictured laid on the floor, or crouched in a cage painted up like an animal. PETA's use of celebrities, nudity, sexualization and hierarchical messages about men, women, and non-white people are problematic. Deckha suggests that the organization may be resorting to cheap publicity since issues of animal rights are still in such a marginal position. Many animal activists experience trauma, both from viewing disturbing images of animal cruelty in their research, and also from being ridiculed by general society. PETA seems to be responding to this difficulty, trying to use humour and common culture to appeal to the broader public, yet their use of sexuality and idealized body images remains problematic. Conference-goers' opinions were firmly mixed on the issue; some believed the ads useful, funny, and even empowering, while others were deeply offended by the imagery PETA chose to use.

Another main focus at the conference revolved around tactics, as speakers denounced the idea of violence and coercion in the name of "animal rights" and sought to define effective means of

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liberating beings that cannot speak for themselves. Lee Hall, a powerhouse presenter, brought us right to the edge of the most radical thoughts in animal liberation in discussing tactics for activism. Structuring her talk around her new book *Capers in the Churchyard*, Hall accused "militant" animal rights activists of being opportunists who make all activists into targets. She charges that their actions do nothing short of playing into the hands of people who would like to continue exploiting animals: they polarize public opinion when they use destructive tactics, such as bomb scares and intimidation of vivisection researchers at their homes. Supported by a turn in public opinion against "eco-terrorists" and animal rights activists following such debacles, the recently passed Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act makes it possible to punish anyone who causes loss of profits for animal industry businesses, so activists can now be sued or sent to jail whether they are leafletting or firebombing. The antagonism engaged in by militants also plays right into the prison industrial complex in the United States, which has 5% of the world's population but 25% of its prison population. Hall asks the (often young) activists who engage in these desperate, violent attacks: "Do you think it advances the rights of animals to offer your body as raw material for the industries that make the cages?"

Another problem with trying to coerce society into changing its ways, is that this approach is antithetical to the whole animal liberation movement, which at its heart is a movement of non-violence and respect for all beings. For Hall, true radicalism involves respecting and having faith in other humans; in such a long-term struggle as the liberation of animals, *avoidance* of violence is far more radical, since it speaks of patience and hope for the future. She leaves us with food for thought as she asserts that veganism, the exclusion of all animal products from one's diet, is radical, direct action, since it immediately produces relations of respect towards animals. It spares animals from being used and killed, and spares rainforests from being chopped for their pastures. Lee Hall asks, "Isn't that Heaven on earth right now?"

All in all, this conference was a tour de force of new directions for the animal rights movement to absorb, with all participants and speakers expressing great concern for community, for supporting one another across struggles, and for careful thought and peaceful activism to further the cause of animal liberation. In total there were six speakers at this conference; for brevity's sake I have not reviewed the presentations of Valery Giroux, Matthew Penzer or Anthony Marr. To find out more about the conference and keep up to date on next year's schedule, please visit the Student Animal Legal Defence Fund website at www.law.uvic.ca/saldf