

## **A conversation with David Byer of PETA, May 23, 2014**

### **Participants**

- David Byer — Senior Corporate Liaison, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
- Eliza Scheffler — Research Analyst, GiveWell

**Note:** These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by David Byer.

### **Summary**

GiveWell spoke with David Byer of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) as part of its investigation of opportunities to reduce the harms of food animal production. Conversation topics included PETA's current campaign against dehorning, the different strategies PETA uses in its campaigns, and the benefits of lab-grown meats.

### **Overview of PETA's work on farmed animal welfare**

There are three primary ways PETA helps farmed animals:

- (1) Stopping or reducing the consumption of animals and their biological output, such as eggs and milk
- (2) Eliminating or reducing cruel practices in animal farming
- (3) Promoting vegan foods

### **Example of a campaign: dehorning**

#### *Overview of dehorning*

Dehorning (which includes disbudding) usually occurs within the first few weeks of a calf's life. It involves using chemicals or a hot iron to burn out the tissue in the calf's head that would otherwise grow into horns. If done after a calf is two weeks old, the developing horns must be cut out. While studies have not looked at the long-term effects of dehorning, studies show that it is a very painful and stressful experience for calves.

Because calves are resistant during the process, dehorning is a difficult and unpleasant job for farmers. Some farm workers begin to resent the cows that they must dehorn. This resentment can lead to further abuses of cows. Thus, by stopping dehorning, one could potentially reduce other abuses too.

Contrary to popular belief, both male and female cows can have horns. In the dairy industry, 98-99% of all cows are dehorned because horns are a safety threat to farmers. In the beef industry, dehorning is not as common because many beef cows carry genes for being born without horns. Cows that carry the genes for no horns are called "polled" cows.

The genes that cause polled cows are dominant. So, if farmers introduce polled cows into a herd, they will likely get more polled cows once the cows breed.

### *PETA's campaign*

A couple of years ago, PETA began a campaign to stop the practice of dehorning cows. The campaign is expected to be a long term one, but there has already been significant progress. PETA has worked with companies throughout the food supply chain—including farms, grocery chains, restaurant chains, and food manufacturers—in an effort to encourage the breeding of polled cows, forever eliminating the need to dehorn. Breeding polled cattle used to be considered unrealistic because only 1-2% of all dairy cattle had the correct genes. However, Aurora Organic Dairy, the leading U.S. organic milk and butter private label supplier, has already switched to using polled bulls on all of its farms. This means half of all calves on Aurora Organic Dairy's farms will be born without horns, and will not need to go through the painful process of dehorning. Similarly, Rockview Farms of southern California, a regional supplier for large chains like In-N-Out and Trader Joe's, has entirely switched over to polled bulls on its organic farm. Other suppliers are also beginning to follow suit, which PETA says is as a result of its efforts.

## **Deciding on campaigns**

PETA asks three main questions when considering a campaign:

- (1) How much suffering could the campaign prevent?
- (2) How practical is the campaign, e.g. can we make a real difference?
- (3) Is the issue already being addressed?

The third question—whether or not there are already others working on the issue—is particularly important. PETA prefers to work on issues that are currently not being addressed. For example, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was not much public awareness of the cruelty of gestation crates (metal and cement cages so small and narrow that pigs can't turn around or take more than a single step in any direction), so PETA started a campaign to bring the issue to public attention. PETA's 2007 investigation at a Smithfield supplier in North Carolina helped to educate the public about industry cruelty and put pressure on the company.

### *Decision to pursue the dehorning campaign*

When considering the dehorning campaign three years ago, PETA began by reviewing literature on dehorning and speaking to academics, leading farmers, and other experts. This research established that dehorning was one of the most painful experiences for cows on factory farms. Furthermore, breeding polled cows seemed like an easy solution that would appeal to farmers, who would save time, labor, and money if they did not need to dehorn their herds. Because farmers were already working with artificial inseminators, they were accustomed to making breeding decisions on a daily basis. Thus, selecting for polled cows would not be much additional work. Finally, no one else was working to

prevent dehorning, even though it was a widespread practice. Thus, because PETA believed that a campaign against dehorning would prevent significant harm, was practical, and would bring attention to an ignored problem, PETA decided to do the campaign.

## **Campaign strategies**

PETA uses multiple strategies and messages for its campaigns. Using many types of messages helps PETA reach a wide variety of people, and different issues require different approaches. PETA tends to focus on:

- Public education
- Corporate negotiations and campaigns
- Advocacy

### **Public education**

#### *Undercover investigations*

PETA conducts undercover investigations in order to gather information for public education campaigns. People often do not understand the conditions in which farm animals are raised; undercover investigations bring these conditions to light, showing practices like dehorning. These practices shock people, who will then eat less meat or request that companies change their practices. This means fewer animals are ultimately harmed.

Last year, PETA conducted the first undercover investigation of lobster and crab slaughter facilities. In seafood facilities owned by Linda Bean, PETA found that lobsters and crabs were torn apart or crushed while still alive. Scientific studies show that lobsters and crabs feel pain, yet people often ignore crustaceans because they are not "cute and cuddly." Undercover investigations in this industry are important because even crustaceans deserve respect.

#### *Social Media*

PETA maintains a robust online presence. Data that can demonstrate PETA's reach includes:

- Last year, PETA's website was visited by more than 38 million people.
- PETA's online videos reached 17 million viewers.
- PETA's Facebook posts reach an average of 16 million users each month.
- PETA's Facebook posts are more "talked about" (i.e. shared and commented on) than the posts of U.S. Weekly, BuzzFeed, and other animal advocacy groups.
- In January, 1.3 million people "liked" the PETA Facebook page.
- PETA has over 500,000 Twitter followers.

PETA also was able to fill 350,000 requests for vegetarian starter kits last year. 90% of meat eaters changed their eating habits after reading the starter kit—half of those who changed became vegetarian, and half ate less meat.

PETA also works with celebrities to produce videos or statements. A celebrity might do a vegan or vegetarian testimonial, or they may speak out in favor of one of PETA's campaigns. For example, Joaquín Phoenix recently participated in a video for PETA on myths about fish. Media and consumers pay much more attention to animal issues when a celebrity is associated with exposing the cruelty.

### *peta2*

peta2 is the world's largest animal rights youth group. There are more than 70,000 active 13-21 year-olds on the "street team." Some members will tour with concerts as they raise awareness about animal cruelty; for example, peta2 has spent years touring with the Warped Tour. Through these tours, members have reached out to more than 200,000 people at colleges and music festivals. peta2 also works to make vegetarian and vegan options available in college dining halls. Last year peta2 launched a college outreach program, and there are now 26 campuses with a peta2 student representative. These representatives promote vegan living and receive a stipend to host speaker events or free food events in order to raise awareness about factory farming issues.

### *PETA Latino*

PETA Latino is a new animal rights program focused on encouraging veganism in Latino populations. PETA has had success working with Latino celebrities in the past, and hopes this program will build on that success. Currently the program is focused on the Los Angeles and San Diego areas. The website ([petalatino.com](http://petalatino.com)) already receives 1.3 million page views per month.

## **Corporate campaigns**

PETA's involvement in corporate campaigns began in the late 90s, when PETA negotiated with McDonald's for two years to introduce some basic animal welfare practices into its supply chain. This strategy was new; previously companies had never paid much attention to the animals in their supply chains. PETA organized 400 demonstrations against McDonald's to pressure them during these talks. Once McDonald's agreed to make changes, other companies like Burger King, Wendy's, Safeway, and Albertsons followed suit.

Historically, PETA has had success working with restaurant chains, grocery chains, and food manufacturers. Not only are these the companies most exposed to public scrutiny, they are also the customers of factory farms. PETA sees positive results when consumers pressure these companies to improve their supply chains, and these companies in turn pressure the farms they buy from. PETA is able to get this pressuring process started by mobilizing its large supporter base. PETA has built up a reputation, and companies know that they will receive a lot of negative publicity for a long time if they do not work with PETA. A lot of the work on corporate campaigns is confidential, but companies that PETA has worked with include Burger King, Safeway, and Denny's. Currently, PETA is working with companies to stop the practice of dehorning.

## *Corporate campaigns vs. legislative campaigns*

PETA prefers corporate campaigns to legislative ones. In corporate work, participants are looking for a win-win solution—the solution to dehorning is a good example of this. In Mr. Byer’s experience, the work that most benefits farm animals is the cooperative, behind-the-scenes work of corporate meetings and negotiations. Because corporations are concerned about protecting their brand, the strength of PETA’s activist support, when needed, encourages corporate executives to negotiate and compromise to prevent a public campaign that would associate them with cruelty.

In legislative campaigns, groups must work hard to lobby policymakers while corporations push back on those efforts. PETA believes legislative work on a federal level is particularly difficult these days given the frequent stalemates in Congress. Corporate campaigns can bypass these difficulties and change food supply chains more quickly.

PETA has, however, supported some statewide campaigns that ban specific abuses of animals by the meat, egg, and dairy industries.

### **Action alerts**

Although PETA has not found legislative battles to be its best use of resources, PETA will sometimes become engaged in pushing for certain bills. PETA will lend its large network to a legislative effort by sending out action alerts. These action alerts make people aware of pending legislation and ballot initiatives, and encourage them to vote or contact their representatives.

PETA might also do an action alert if a company is being resistant in a corporate campaign. Within a few days of the action alert, a CEO might have tens of thousands of emails in his or her inbox. This encourages companies to come to or return to negotiations. In 2013, PETA supporters sent 12 million messages to various government and corporate officials. Many of these messages concerned “ag gag” bills, since ag gag laws would suppress basic freedoms and hide egregious practices on farms, which could threaten human health.

Through its social media, PETA can mobilize its network very quickly. For example, PETA campaigns to end the use of horse-drawn carriages in New York City. Those in the PETA network will respond immediately if they see a horse collapse in the street, and mobilization happens so rapidly that PETA can coordinate a protest that same day.

### **Impact**

There are several indicators that PETA and animal rights activists generally are making an impact. First, one can see changes in the ways that grocery stores and restaurants now present themselves, and in the food that they offer. For example, Chipotle has removed bacon from its beans and now offers Sofritas (a tofu option). Tropical Smoothie Café also offers vegan “chicken” in its wraps and salads. There are vegan options at NASCAR races,

university dining halls, baseball stadiums, and more. Second, data shows that U.S. meat consumption has been declining.

## **Vegan Living**

Although PETA supports incremental improvements in animal welfare, PETA ultimately believes that animals are not ours to eat. There are a tremendous number of problems with factory farms, and some of these problems are inherent in the industry. These problems make it difficult to ethically consume animal products. For example, in the egg industry

- Male chicks are useless and are ground up alive or suffocated to death
- Chicks are separated from their mothers immediately after birth
- Egg-laying hens are killed after two years because they are too worn out to produce enough eggs to be profitable

These problems exist even when you buy “free range.”

PETA adds: "PETA has pushed hard and will continue to do so to reduce the sum total of suffering caused by the meat, dairy, and egg industries—because that makes a huge difference if you are a pig or a chicken on a factory farm. But it doesn't mean that we would ever suggest that people should eat meat—since we know that *massive* suffering still goes into every bite. Yes, it's better to pay extra for an egg from a chicken who had a marginally less hideous life than one who suffered more, but we must do better by animals. In fact, we have yet to find a “humane” factory farm where animals don't have their tails cut off and their ears painfully notched; where they aren't debeaked, dehorned, or castrated without anesthesia; where they aren't kept in crowded conditions without sunlight or fresh air; where they don't have their beloved children taken away from them; where they aren't denied the companionship of others; where they aren't sent to a feedlot; or where they are instantly dispatched without the trauma of capture, the horror of transportation, and the terror of seeing other animals killed before sharing the same fate. So, no matter what issues are addressed in reform efforts for the meat, egg, and dairy industries, there will always be more problems. Thus, it is best for people to aim for veganism.

Many people—from Bill Clinton to Bill Gates as well as TV stars and athletes—are talking about how going vegan boosts their energy and keeps them trim, slim, and heart-healthy. Even ordinary supermarkets are packed with tasty vegan foods: In addition to fresh fruits and vegetables, grains, nuts, and legumes, there are faux meats that will satisfy any taste, including vegan chicken and ribs, as well as dairy-free products such as almond milk, rice milk ice cream, and vegan cheese. It's easy to find a vegan meal in restaurants, including steakhouses, and there are now vegan options in almost every school across the country. Some universities even have all-vegan cafeterias. Fast food is in on the act, too, with the tofu burritos at Moe's Southwest Grill, the veggie subs at Subway and Quiznos, and veggie burgers all over the place."

## **Environmental groups**

PETA sometimes works with other groups. PETA is engaged with environmental groups on issues such as animal agriculture being a leading cause of climate change. Whether it's the overuse of resources, unchecked water or air pollution, or soil erosion, raising animals for food is wreaking havoc on the Earth. PETA has encouraged the environmental community to tell their supporters that the most important step that one can take to save the planet is to go vegan.

PETA also has had issues with environmental groups on toxicology issues. Sometimes environmental groups want the EPA to use animal testing to research toxins, and PETA has to push back on this and inform them on modern, non-animal methods.

### **Other organization to talk to**

- PCRM (Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine)

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