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Getting at the Numbers

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Getting at the Numbers

Henry Spira, leader of the Campaign Against the LD50 test, talks about how he builds coalitions to focus action.

Interview Conducted by Jim Mason

AGENDA: What is the LD50 test and what is it used for?

SPIRA: LD50 stands for Lethal Dose 50 percent. It tells you how much of a chemical, per body weight, kills half of groups of 40 to 200 animals. It's the universal death test: every chemical, every "new, improved" product is automatically LD50ed to provide meaningless numbers to regulatory agencies.

AGENDA: The Coalition to Abolish the LD50 aims to "bury" the test this year. What is the situation right now in this battle?

SPIRA: It's really not a battlefield situation. There's hardly anybody left who will defend the LD50. Yet, the LD50 continues to poison millions of animals to death, painfully and needlessly. The foundation has been knocked out from under the LD50. There is no opposition to overcome, except apathy and inertia. The LD50 is tilting. But we need one big heavy push to knock it over.

AGENDA: Is the LD50 part of a larger issue for you?

SPIRA: Yes. The larger issue is using 70 to 100 million animals as if they are mere lab tools. And the science community is becoming aware that you don't go around ordering a thousand rabbits or ten thousand rodents the way you order a case of light bulbs on a Monday morning.

Once you spotlight that the LD50, the foundation stone, makes no sense, then everything is open to questioning. You have undermined the myth.

AGENDA: There's been a lot of talk about momentum on lab animal issues; momentum, against the Draize test, momentum against the LD50. Is this just a lot of back-patting, or have there been concrete changes for the animals?

SPIRA: There are real changes. Let me give you some examples.

We had to spotlight the Draize horror of pouring lye, ammonia and oven cleaners into the eyes of conscious rabbits before the government decided that it wasn't necessary.

So now, chemicals at certain acidity or alkalinity levels, as well as skin irritants, are assumed to be eye irritants without further testing. And, meanwhile, researchers around the world are seeking non-animal systems.

Similarly, the LD50 is being questioned across the board. According to reports from trade associations and individual corporations, the classic LD50 is beginning to be phased out. But we need to accelerate the pace.

An encouraging new direction is that some major corporations and testing labs are shifting resources toward developing non-animal systems because they are faster, cheaper and more protective of public health. According to industry figures, a number of the major companies have had reductions of about 30 percent in the past two years.

AGENDA: You've been successful in your campaigns against the cat sex experiments at the Museum of Natural History, against New York State's Metcalf-Hatch pound seizure law and, of course, most recently, against the Draize and LD50 tests. What's your formula?

SPIRA: We choose the right target on the basis of common sense. We are aware of the politics of numbers. If you can rescue five million animals from painful death by poisoning, I think that should take precedence over some issue that might have higher visibility, that may be popular, and that may have automatic emotional appeal, but involves only 60 animals.

I work with good people and we work collaboratively, like a think tank. In the science field, Dr. Leonard Rack and Dr. Andrew Rowan are a great help.

After much homework and discussion, we develop a plan with short and long-term goals within time frames. We pay attention to developing and maintaining a rhythm which always begins with non-controversial dialogue and may include demonstrations and public awareness publicity related to focused objectives. There's always room for spontaneity. And rather than a formula, we evolve, adjust and fine tune our campaign by living through the actions themselves. Our antennas are always rotating and we try to amplify every positive action.

AGENDA: All of your campaigns have been characterized by an absence of hostility and threats toward the people and activity you moved against. How, then, do you pressure them to change?

SPIRA: We don't adopt a "holier than thou" attitude. We try to fuse our feelings and thinking. We see it as a political problem. There is an injustice -- what can we do about it?

We want our potential adversary to become our ally. That means that our objectives must be reasonable, realistic and workable. We encourage dialogue to generate the least resistance. But dialogue must include real progress to measurably reduce animal suffering.

And then, as soon as they become responsive, we see them as allies to get the job done. But, if they don't respond, then we struggle to win. And we have the track record to prove it.

Let's look at it in another way. Many of us are in the animal rights movement because we empathize with the animal victims. Similarly, it's good politics to put ourselves in the minds of others: If we were in their shoes, what would make us want to change?

AGENDA: So your system requires knowing something about the human animal and our society, doesn't it?

SPIRA: Yes – how to bring people to change.

AGENDA: Of all the tactics available to the movement, what single one do you think represents the best hope for creating a huge, unified political campaign?

SPIRA: I think it's the coalition idea. And that begins with checking out all sides of an issue, careful planning, common sense and a good bit of audacity. The objectives must be winnable and should focus on rescuing millions or billions of animals from the pain and the killings.

A coalition brings little bits of power together and makes a great power. A lot of droplets of water spread every-which-where will evaporate. Brought together, these drops of water form a mighty stream and eventually a relentless tidal wave that can knock out anything in its path.

AGENDA: In your experience as an activist for the past eight years, have you seen changes for the better in the movement?

SPIRA: I see progress. In the past, major organizations have concerned themselves exclusively with the popular cats and dogs. Now they are beginning to turn toward the other 99% of animal suffering which takes place on factory farms and in animal laboratories. And there's a new direction which recognizes that it doesn't help the animal victims any if we merely report atrocities of the month; we need to rapidly and measurably change what's going on -- not merely report it.

In that connection, anti-vivisection ain't what is used to be. Organizations like Pegeen Fitzgerald's Millennium Guild (MG) and Bob Ford's New England Anti-Vivisection Society (NEAVS) have committed major resources to make things happen. They have placed full page ads to further the Draize and LD50 campaigns and they have funded non-animal research and an effective communications network reaching throughout the science community. These activities are setting standards of professionalism in the movement.

AGENDA: There's been an awful lot of animal rights conferences and mass rallies lately. What do you think of this trend in the movement?

SPIRA: It depends. In England, they spend a couple of weeks on rallies which energize activists to work effectively on specific campaigns. A rally makes participants feel good because they feel linked with others. But neither rallies nor media coverage are ends in themselves. They must be connected with programs and campaigns which are going somewhere.

In the case of MFA, many dedicated activists spent enormous energies for more than one year which led to impressive one-shot rallies. Unfortunately, the rallies lacked thought-out objectives, lacked programmatic follow up, and ultimately wasted the energies of committed activists as well as hundreds of thousands of dollars which went into supporting this failed effort. Ultimately, the MFA officialdom must take responsibility for this dreadful waste. The net result of this massive effort is that the primate centers were given more tax monies than ever before – over \$2 million extra – which is more than the usual cost of living increase.

AGENDA: Some people in the movement have called you a "sell-out" and a "compromiser" because, according to them, you're not an absolutist for the abolition of vivisection. Your response?

SPIRA: I don't compromise with injustice. I want to see a world where no human or non-human is harmed. But it does not help the animal victims to daydream, "wouldn't it be nice if ... " We need to plan what we are going to do today and tomorrow in this real world, and move it all forward.

The only moral issue I see is our obligation to work in the most effective way possible to most rapidly bring down the pain and the death. And it's been the history of all successful rights movements that they moved to their ultimate goal step-by-step. It really doesn't help the animal victims to holler: "Abolition! All or nothing!" When the end result, after 100 years of self-indulgence, is that the number of victims has escalated from a few thousand to over 70 million. That's a pitiful track record. It's time to rethink myths which have failed for a century. I want abolition as much as anybody, but I also want to make things happen now.

AGENDA: What are you going to take on next?

SPIRA: In keeping with our cumulative approach, we started off with 60 cats at the Museum of Natural History, went to a couple of hundred thousand animals with the Draize test, then to several million in the LD50. Next, we want to expand the LD50 review to all routine animal research and testing everywhere, from the local high school, to the National Institutes of Health, following the pattern being established by the FDA's task force. And then, obviously, we're thinking about the animals for dinner – over four billion animals who never have a good day.

AGENDA: Why do you think the U.S. movement keeps avoiding the farm animal issue?

SPIRA: I think because it's seen as much monumental abuse – almost too big to take on. But nobody would have tackled the LD50 and Draize a few years ago for the same reason. It can be taken on.

And then there's the reality that people tend to be inconsistent. Can you imagine the Prevention of Cruelty to Children railing against child battering which munching on broiled leg of baby?

But things are happening. There's Nellie Shriver's campaign demanding that fast food chains provide a vegetarian selection. The family going to McDonald's does not now have that option, whereas, at Wendy's they do.

Along this same direction, we can encourage students to campaign for the democratic right to nonviolent meals in school cafeterias.

AGENDA: We're running out of time and space. What would you like to say in closing?

SPIRA: The animal rights movement has been compared to a sleeping giant. We who don't want to see animals harmed are the majority; the giant is stirring. By all of us mobilizing around effective, focused campaigns, the giant can be fully awake and in action.

And then we can liberate the non-human animals and, in the process, ourselves, for we can't be free while billions of our kin are imprisoned and their minds and bodies continuously violated.

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