

The Most **DANGEROUS** Day Job

In documenting unimaginable cruelties, HSUS investigators have achieved unprecedented change

by MIKE SATCHELL



An HSUS team trails a sealing boat in 2006. An encounter with another boat turned dangerous and had the team fleeing for their lives.



When a sealing boat rammed the ice floe holding an HSUS camera team and the floating platform began to break up, there was only one thing left for the intrepid investigators to do: run for their lives.

Flown by helicopter into the Gulf of St. Lawrence just minutes before, they had come to document the brutality of the Canadian seal hunt. If not for their fast feet—and some quick thinking on the part of the pilot—the HSUS crew could have become victims themselves. The sounds of the ice cracking underfoot were drowned only by the whirring blades of the chopper about to lift the team to safety. “The pilot said it was so close—it was a life-threatening situation,” recalls HSUS vice president of investigations and video Kathy Milani.

That incident four years ago wasn’t the only time investigators have been caught in perilous waters. In a similar maneuver also on the Canadian seas, another large vessel deliberately rammed a small HSUS inflatable craft, breaking off part of the propeller on the outboard motor. And team members routinely find themselves the targets of hot pursuit by club-wielding sealers.

Danger is all in a day’s work for HSUS investigators, who have spent decades documenting abhorrent treatment of animals and launching dozens of probes into factory farming, horse slaughter, cap-

tive wildlife killing, animal fighting, puppy mills, the fur industry, and the dog meat trade. Without law enforcement authority, the team must often operate undercover or anonymously to reveal institutionalized abuses that most people never see.

It’s a tough assignment, but progress and personal satisfaction are measured by cruelties exposed, criminals convicted, laws passed, and untold numbers of animals saved. Last year’s investigation of a California slaughterhouse that supplied meat to a federally funded school lunch program, for example, led to a nationwide beef recall, closure of the plant, a number of Congressional hearings, and proposed legislation to mandate humane treatment of animals and greater food safety.

The undercover work has influenced corporate purchasing policies in the private sector; a 2006 investigation exposing conditions at a Michael Foods egg factory farm helped persuade frozen dessert company Ben & Jerry’s to make the transition to cage-free egg suppliers. “In recent years, a range of businesses have felt the squeeze from the organization,” *The Wall Street Journal* concluded in an article about the investigations team last April.

Because team members are regarded by their targets as a threat to profits, pastimes, and livelihoods, the possibility of physical violence is always present. Fear and adrenaline become part of the routine for those

who spend their days secretly filming a dogfight or cockfight where guns and drugs are invariably part of the scene. So does the tedium of months working undercover in a minimum wage job at a factory farm or weeks poring through a mountain of records to gather vital evidence. Sometimes the paper trail is long and winding; the team's recent exposé of Petland's connection to puppy mills involved traveling to several states and sifting through thousands of state health certificates and USDA inspection reports.

But it is the emotional burden and the constant exposure to animal suffering that weigh most heavily. Chad Sisneros, The HSUS's video director, recalls the night in Manila when police pulled over a truck driver suspected of involvement in the illegal dog meat trade, which was under investigation by Humane Society International and Philippine animal welfare groups. The sight that greeted him as he filmed remains indelible in his mind.



"The heat and the smell coming from the truck were just incredible," he says. "Crammed inside were about 100 dogs—mangy, scrawny, scared to death. Their muzzles were tied with rubber or plastic to stop them from barking. They were the lucky ones. At the dog meat market, we filmed the awful fate they were saved from."

Seeing horses being stabbed in the spinal column in Juarez, Mexico, was particularly troubling for investigations director Frank Loftus, who filmed the use of this crude slaughter technique that is banned in the U.S. and Canada. Though the last horse abattoir in the U.S. was shut down in 2007, equines are still sent across the borders to be killed for their meat. "People think of horse

slaughter as the last few seconds of the animals' lives, but the whole thing is cruel from the moment they're dropped off at the auction and sent to large holding pens to the time they're loaded into the trucks for the long hauls to Mexico and Canada," he says. "They are absolutely terrified."

Loftus and Milani experienced their own moments of terror during that investigation when the furious driver of a double-decker horse slaughter truck they were tailing chased their rented SUV at breakneck speed for two miles down a remote Mexican highway before they managed to evade him.

Indifference to the plight of animals by those who perpetrate the cruelty is what fuels Milani's determination to continue exposing it. Says the award-winning filmmaker: "All we can do is document their plight and hope that the public responds." ■

▶ **WATCH VIDEOS** of HSUS investigations at humanesociety.org/animalchannel.

Investigations: Case Files



▶ **DOG FIGHTING** In 2008, The HSUS launched a campaign to wipe out dogfighting in the state of Georgia. A tips hotline, managed by Atlanta-based corporate security firm Norred & Associates—and supported by the Holland M. Ware Foundation—offers up to \$5,000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of dogfighters and has received more than 1,000 calls. The HSUS has investigated dozens of cases in the state, helped bust four major fighting operations, and rescued more than 50 dogs.

▶ **PUPPY MILLS** A five-month probe in Virginia identified more than 900 commercial dog breeding facilities, most of which are never inspected under federal law. At one facility, the owner of more than 1,000 puppies and breeding adults voluntarily relinquished hundreds of animals and was later convicted of animal cruelty. The state legislature responded by passing a tough new law regulating commercial dog breeders.

▶ **TROPHY TAX SCAM** A two-year investigation revealed that wealthy big game hunters were donating heads and hides of animals they killed to phony "museums," including old warehouses and rooms in their own homes. The hunters then claimed as tax deductions the value of the taxidermy mounts—inflated by bogus appraisals—plus the costs of their hunting trips. Working closely with The HSUS, Sen. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) led efforts to close the tax loophole, saving taxpayers some \$50 million over the next decade.



▶ **CHINESE FUR** Many retailers and designers have been falsely advertising or mislabeling fur and fur-trimmed apparel—or not labeling it at all. Some have even called it "faux" fur. Laboratory tests established that more than 30 major companies were using fur from raccoon dogs, animals mostly killed in China and often skinned alive. An HSUS lawsuit filed in November charges six of the nation's largest retailers and designers—including Dillard's, Macy's, and Saks Fifth Avenue—with false labeling or advertising of fur, much of it from raccoon dogs. Legislation has been introduced in Congress and several states to ban raccoon dog fur and require accurate labeling of all animal fur.

▶ **MEXICAN HORSE SLAUGHTER** At an equine slaughterhouse in Juarez, Mexico, an HSUS team filmed horses being stabbed in the neck in an attempt to sever the spinal cord. This leaves them paralyzed and unable to breathe but still sensitive to pain as they are hoisted by a chain to have their throats cut. Congress is now considering banning the export of horses to Mexico and Canada for slaughter.



Cruelty on Camera

In the fall of 2007, an undercover investigator for The HSUS began a \$7-an-hour job as a livestock handler at the Westland/Hallmark dairy cow slaughter plant in Chino, Calif. For six weeks, he secretly recorded scenes of horrific brutality by workers trying to force sick and injured “downer” cows to their feet and into the killing chute—an attempt to comply with the rule that only ambulatory cows can be legally slaughtered for human consumption.

The Westland investigation, released in January 2008, climaxed more than a decade of fighting for reforms in the handling of downed livestock. It was the most important and successful undercover probe in The HSUS’s 55-year history.

The investigator recently spoke with editor-at-large Mike Satchell about the cruelties he’s witnessed—and about his motivations for taking on such dangerous work.



As a young kid, I absolutely loved animals. One day, when I was about 6 years old, we got a flier in the mail on the Canadian seal hunt with gory pictures of dead seals and blood on the ice. I remember staring at it for a long time. The whole notion of suffering and people doing these horrible things was spinning in my head. I became a vegetarian in my teens, and then a vegan.

After graduating from college, I joined an activist group on the East Coast to do undercover investigations, working low-level jobs in chicken slaughter plants around the country. The work was mundane, boring, and grueling.

The desensitization of the workers was shocking. Cruelty became an outlet for some. They no longer saw animals, but objects they could take out their frustrations on. Chickens had their wings torn off from being whipped out of the cages. Their legs were broken when they were hung on the slaughter line. One guy would punch one of the birds every half hour or so, and the animal would rupture and bleed all over the place. Another guy threw them against the walls and stomped on them.

When I joined The HSUS, I investigated broiler plants and also cockfights in Louisiana. The fights were big social occasions. There were families with teenagers and

young kids watching birds fight to the death. Seeing a mother holding her baby on her lap and rooting for whichever rooster the family had bet on was very strange.

Undercover work can be frustrating. There are so many inherent abuses in animal agriculture, and you see things that are really awful. But often there’s no law being broken, nothing to take to a local prosecutor. So you keep at it, trying for good usable video and hoping to record specific violations.

I was in California in 2007, poking around near San Bernardino. At the Westland beef plant, they were hiring, so I applied. They mostly killed old dairy cows, and my job was to help unload them from the trucks, sort them into various pens, and then send them single-file up the chute to the knocking box.

On my very first day, I saw the handling was very rough. Workers used hot shots (electric prods) almost 100 percent of the time in the trucks and in the chute. The voltage causes immediate reaction in the animals. They bellow and their eyes roll back when they are shocked. It causes a lot of pain. Many of the cows had foot problems, lameness, broken hooves, udders that looked in-

fectured. They were all very sickly-looking animals.

When a cow went down and couldn’t get herself up, the cruelty was vicious. The worst thing I filmed was a large cow being dragged out of a truck with a chain attached to her leg. It was literally half an hour to 45 minutes of backing up the Bobcat and trying to pull her along. A truly horrible incident. It

got to the point where the animal quit struggling and bellowing. Then there was silence. She just gave up.

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And it can be scary—there were former gang members working at Westland. It also becomes very dull and routine. You work 10 hours a day, go to the motel, transfer video, type notes, eat bad microwave food, go to sleep, then back to a lousy job.

There are no tearful nights anymore. You have to let go of all of that. I guess there is a natural desensitization. It’s a lonely life. I’ll get burned out and maybe I have two years left. You can’t do deep cover work for very long if you think you’re going to save the world each morning you wake up. But the job needs to be done: If you want the system to change, you have to be a witness to these things. ■

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