DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, AMERICAN TRAIN passengers sometimes entertained themselves by lacerating animals for “fun.”

Clearly some people consider such events harmless entertainment; they are often promoted as family events, and children may be encouraged to participate in the killing. During pigeon shoots such as the one held in Hegins, children are employed to wring rattlesnakes. A rattlesnake “control” officer in South Dakota has noted that for every 100 rattlesnakes killed by poisoning of their dens, 40 snakes of other species are also killed.

Killing contests damage the environment, needlessly cause animals to suffer and die, and encourage an acceptance of destruction and brutality. In 1984 Nevada’s assistant attorney general wrote an opinion stating that, while the state is permitted to kill pigeons in certain circumstances (for example, those in which the birds are considered pests), the intentional mutilation and injury inflicted on pigeons during shoots is unjustified. Several states—including Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Ohio—have specific provisions in their animal-cruelty statutes that pertain to pigeon shoots. In New Jersey, for example, it is a misdemeanor to “use a live pigeon, fowl or other bird for the purpose of a target, or to be shot at either for amusement or as a test of skill in marksmanship,” or to shoot at a bird at an organized event. Michigan accords broader protection; there, it is illegal to use any animal for target shooting.

In many cases, however, state animal-cruelty statutes—intended to protect animals from abuse, neglect, and wanton destruction—have not been applied to killing contests. Although Colorado’s anti-cruelty statute declares it unlawful for any person to needlessly mutilate or kill an animal—and although the court determined in the 1996 case Waters v People that shooting captive doves for the purpose of improving marksmanship, for sport, or for amusement is unjustified under the statute—Colorado officials have failed to halt the Top Dog prairie dog shoot.

Killing contests continue despite state anti-cruelty statutes, many people have sought to end these events through the public pressure of protest demonstrations. Unfortunately some of these efforts have backfired. During a recent Top Dog prairie dog shoot, for example, protest commotion apparently prompted more prairie dogs to emerge from their holes in order to investigate. The prairie dogs were then easy targets. Protest demonstrations may also increase event publicity, attracting more people as contest participants or spectators.

How, then, can we stop killing contests? Citizens should inform their state legislators of their objections, in order to prompt more effective enforcement of existing anti-cruelty laws and the creation of new laws. In April HSUS President Paul G. Irwin wrote a letter on behalf of our members to Governor Mark Raci­cot of Montana alerting him to a porcupine-hunting contest. Mr. Irwin expressed our concerns about the hunt’s brutality, the message that acceptance of such brutality conveys to society, and the hunt’s potentially detrimental effects on the porcupine population. Following our protest, the porcupine-killing contest was canceled. In 1991 the San Juan Coyote Hunt was proposed as an enter­taining way of killing coyotes, who, it was believed, reduced the number of deer available as hunters’ targets. Prizes would have gone to those who killed the most coyotes. The HSUS urged our members to protest against the hunt and express concerns about the “management” practice of increasing one “game” species at another’s expense. As a result of public pressure, the hunt was canceled.

Currently The HSUS is also examining ways in which federal legislation might be used to ban pigeon shoots and other forms of “hunting” of captive animals. We believe that killing contests epitomize human abuse of animals and the environment—and should be banned.

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