

INTRODUCTION

THE ROLE OF ANIMALS IN LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

By
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The most important domestic issue of the new millennium is making our communities more livable: our families safer, healthier and more economically secure and our environment richer than we found it. These objectives are interrelated. Affordable housing, efficient transportation, a clean environment and a high quality of life attract new businesses and high wage jobs. Reinvesting in existing cities and towns revitalizes older neighborhoods, invigorates local commerce, reduces sprawl, cuts commute times, and protects open spaces from development. Reducing traffic congestion improves both air and water quality and neighborhood livability. Protecting open space preserves recreational opportunities as well as family farms.

Yet a community's livability goes far beyond the built environment, land-use planning, infrastructure investments, and environmental cleanup. It also encompasses the companion animals that share our homes, the wildlife that inhabits our neighborhoods, and the species that migrate through the rivers, forests, mountains, and countryside of our regions. All contribute to the livability of our communities, be they urban or rural. Even the occasional coyote, cougar or deer that strays into a suburban setting reminds us of our connections with wilderness and increases our awareness of the biodiversity that is essential to our survival. A truly livable community encompasses—and respects—all life.

An important part of livable communities' initiatives, then, is to understand how animals fit into our lives. Many of us have firsthand experience with the value of a companion animal, be it a dog, a cat, a pygmy goat, a reptile, goldfish, or canary. Almost forty percent of our households have a dog or cat—over 100 million dogs and cats in all.

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Many Americans regard companion animals as members of the family, spending time, attention, and billions of dollars each year on their food, care and medical treatment. Each year, communities spend hundreds of millions of dollars more neutering strays, finding adoptive homes for those left behind, and dealing with the consequences of animals that have been neglected and abused.

Not all animals enjoy the privileged position of household companion or neighborhood resident. We have always depended on animals for our food and clothing, but technical innovations since the industrial revolution have enabled us to organize and manage whole animal populations as natural production systems for food, clothing, scientific testing, and even gene production. This emphasis on production often leads to exploitation and abuse.

We have made advances in child labor, the treatment of minorities and women, and the stewardship of our environment because of better knowledge, more resources and maturity, if not a higher state of awareness. The stage has been set for similar evolution in our treatment of animals and the public policy surrounding animal welfare.

A livable community promotes the humane treatment of animals, whether in our households, the community at large, or the wild. Animals enrich our lives on a daily basis, by reminding us that life exists in many forms, many of which seem far more beautiful, forgiving, or purposeful than we. Conversely, the mistreatment of animals not only degrades our environment and eliminates critical biodiversity, it devalues us as a species.

Part of our involvement in animal welfare is due to self-interest. Evidence suggests that individuals who mistreat animals are more inclined to mistreat their fellow humans. At the same time, it has been well documented that animals can have a positive effect on human behavior and health. A puppy or a kitten can reduce one's heart rate and blood pressure; a companion animal can lift the spirits as well as provide significant services for the disabled.

One of the more interesting aspects of my service in Congress has been watching the emergence of animal rights issues on the political landscape. As someone whose congressional career is devoted to the concepts of livable communities, I find this particularly heartening. There is also the growing realization that the health of wildlife, including those in urban settings, is directly linked to the health of the ecosystem for human inhabitants. A stream that is not healthy for fish cannot be healthy for families. The loss of species is not just a loss on some theoretical plane, of concern only to scientists and ethicists. A loss is, in a very tangible sense, a weakness in the health of our environment and the ability for it to sustain life, including, ultimately, our own.

In my judgment, the challenge to the political process is to rise above partisanship and ideology and to resist the undue influence of special, extraordinarily entrenched interests that exploit the environment and animals. America has the financial resources and the techni-

cal and practical understanding to achieve great progress. It is not due to a lack of knowledge, money or ability that we disregard the welfare of animals and our environment. It is a failure of our political will—and more importantly, our failure as individuals—when we do not speak out and do our part.

106th Congress

One indication of the growing momentum in support of animal welfare can be seen in the successes of the last session of Congress. In the three terms I have served in Congress, I have been pleased to witness the emergence of animal rights issues and the development of a strong constituency that supports animal interests. While this Congress has not been the most favorable, from my perspective, on a number of human rights and environmental concerns, and while there is still too much power in the hands of interests who have been hostile to the protection to the interests of animals, there are still a number of bright spots. The last session of Congress passed legislation to protect research animals, companion animals, marine animals, wildlife, and farm animals, as well as animals subjected to cruel treatment. Each of these protections has made a difference in discreet, but significant ways.

In the 106th Congress, we created a coordinating committee to promote scientific testing methodologies that do not use animals. H.R. 3415 was approved to authorize humane sanctuaries for chimpanzees no longer used for experimental purposes. Both of these efforts had broad bipartisan support. I was especially pleased that progress was made dealing with the tragic issue of animal cruelty. Legislation has been enacted to provide strict penalties for hurting animals used in Federal law enforcement. There was also overwhelming support for H.R. 1887, which increased the penalties for those who depict animal cruelty for commercial gain—the so-called “crush” videos. As a committee member working on the reauthorization of the Federal Aeronautics Administration, I was pleased that we included provisions to promote better treatment for animals traveling on airlines. Many who are concerned about animal welfare may discount the enactment of simple, common sense amendments, such as the prohibition of “shark-finning,” but it is important to realize that in the vast range of competing interests and issues, having a wide range of support for a variety of provisions is a sign of momentum and strength.

Even more encouraging is that each session that I have been in Congress there has been a discernable increase in the number of legislative items that are proposed, as well as a broader range of proposals with wider bi-partisan support. This suggests that greater victories are ahead. From my vantage point, this indicates a growing coalition of people in Congress who are interested in animal welfare. Republicans and Democrats alike are exercising significant leadership on this issue, proof that compassion for God’s creatures is not the providence of

a single ideology or political party or geographic arena. We have seen the involvement of members such as Senator Bob Smith—one of the most conservative members of Congress—who even left the Republican Party for a while because it was not conservative enough for his principles. Others, like my colleague Congressman Peter DeFazio from Oregon's unique Fourth Congressional District, embrace animal welfare issues wholeheartedly. Mr. DeFazio represents a district that includes some of the most conservative—and most liberal—voters in America, yet he led efforts last session to restrict the use of traps for predator controls.

Despite these successes, Congress must take additional strides to support animal welfare issues. The challenge for the federal government in promoting livable communities is to deal responsibly with animal welfare, standing up where necessary to entrenched special interests and harmful practices.

For instance, I have deep reservations about “factory farming” to attain meat at any price, since it presents severe environmental, health, and safety risks to workers and subjects animals to an unimaginable existence. This is extreme cruelty, but is tolerated by many as an “economic necessity” of food production. Treating an animal like a machine is not just inhumane and cruel, it punishes the environment by creating vast lagoons of animal waste and effluent from huge processing factories, posing real risks to our health and the environment. The men and women who work in the hot and the cold, the stench and the waste, the body parts and the blood, pay a tremendous price to put food on our tables.

Factory farms also make it more difficult for humane and environmentally sensitive farming practices to survive. Those who practice more responsible farming methods find it hard to compete in an economy that values production efficiency more than animal welfare or environmental health. Farms that raise and process livestock by more humane means give consumers the ability to choose food products that are of superior quality—and morality. It is simply not right that those who exploit both animals and the environment should enjoy an economic advantage over those who adhere to more compassionate and healthy practices.

Congress recently lost a tremendous opportunity to make this point when Hurricane Floyd hit factory hog farms in the lowlands of North Carolina. Of the approximately 2500 hog farms in that state, nearly forty percent were located in flood plains. Vast lagoons of highly polluting hog waste were destroyed by the hurricane's wrath; almost half of the lagoons continued to overflow after the floodwaters receded. Congress had a unique opportunity to prevent the reconstruction of those destructive facilities in a region so vulnerable to nature's fury—and passed it right by. Instead, federal money was granted to rebuild the hog farms and their vast waste lagoons, providing yet another example of how we often choose to maintain the status quo—even when it is obviously the wrong thing to do.

107th Congress

My goal for the 107th Congress is to help make animal welfare part of the broader concept of a truly livable community. We are all part of an integrated whole. Key priority legislation will protect animals from harm, save taxpayer money, provide health and safety benefits, and mobilize coalitions that will support the overall objectives of safe, healthy, and economically secure communities.

As an example, I am working with Portland lawyer Alan Jensen on legislation that would change federal tax law to make it easier for people to establish trusts that provide for the care of companion animals when their human dies. This bill will provide for the welfare of animals considered to be true family members and will help create peace of mind for the person establishing the trust. It will also relieve society from the financial burden of caring for an orphaned or abandoned animal. Finally, it may also encourage people to plan ahead for the day of their own death.

In a similar vein, a bill to implement even modest controls on factory farm operations, such as minimum requirements for animal enclosures, health standards, and compliance with reasonable environmental standards would have multiple benefits. Obviously any improvement in the condition of these unfortunate animals is adequate justification for taking action, but such regulations would also improve water and air quality, reduce noxious odors, and improve the working conditions for employees. By increasing the costs of doing business, it would also reduce the competitive edge that factory farms currently enjoy over more humane and environmentally sensitive operations, encouraging sounder, more humane practices and helping smaller farms resist the lucrative alternative of selling out to developers for the next regional shopping mall or housing development.

I am looking forward to having a public forum with various experts in my community to discuss recent developments in animal welfare, explore issues of animal rights, and give citizens the chance to be heard on this important subject. This process will, I hope, encourage the development of a broader coalition to support animal welfare in the 3rd Congressional District and will certainly help me refine my thinking and priorities in the new Congress.

If every member of Congress held a similar forum, we would see the emergence of a stronger national network for animal welfare. There is no reason that every member of Congress cannot advance these issues by adopting one or two legislative items. Doing so would certainly increase the awareness of politicians and their staff to the importance of animal welfare in our communities and our lives. If we can increase that sensitivity, strengthen the advocacy community, and have every member of Congress advance one or two items of legislation, progress will accelerate dramatically. If the third of the American families who have a beloved pet—or if the millions more who care deeply about some aspect of this cause—were to become active, the

movement for protecting the interests of animals could become one of the most powerful political interests in our society. The key is to be organized, focused, and direct. Given the enormous stakes involved, we cannot afford not to do our part.