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How to Act Locally

Contribution to GTI Forum [Solidarity with Animals](#)

Gwendolyn Hallsmith

Some of my earliest memories were of the animals in my life; the deep contradiction of love and violence that Eileen Crist [describes](#) made me remember my childhood outrage at the way animals are treated. I think we are born with an innate sense of relationship; it has to be “educated” out of us to accept and participate in the current industrial food system. Rationalizations like the differential imperative enforce the hierarchical control over everything imposed by the wealthy and powerful men who have dominated economics, governance, and social systems for thousands of years.

Systems, in turn, are driven by human needs. While governance has a hand on the steering wheel, the power, the key driver, comes from the legitimate needs we all have. We need water, so large and complex water systems have sprung up. We need conflict resolution, so there are courts and assemblies. We need love, so we have networks of people who spend their time caring for others. We need food, so the industrially efficient exploitation of animals for food has grown exponentially, largely beyond the everyday view of the vast majority of people. It is a horror show, and as Crist correctly points out, it is destroying us and the planet.

There are things we can all do about it. One of my first jobs as an activist, forty years ago, was with Greenpeace. I sailed on the Rainbow Warrior to the Gulf of St. Lawrence to protect the baby harp seals. I was a deckhand. The Norwegians sailed across the Atlantic on big factory ships; they were killing the baby harp seals because their soft white fur was highly valued by the fur market in Europe. Greenpeace campaign staff sprayed the seals with a harmless green dye, to ruin the white coat and hopefully keep the seal alive. You don't have to be a Darwinist to understand why killing all the babies is an existential threat to the species. Back then, Canada passed a law called the Seal Protection Act that prohibited anyone from being near the seals who didn't want

to kill them, so the sprayers were thrown in jail. The campaign was successful: by targeting the Norwegians instead of the local subsistence hunters, we got people in Europe to join the protest, and the hunt was shut down.

If direct action campaigns to disrupt the senseless slaughter of animals are not your cup of tea, you could organize a Council of All Beings in your neighborhood, or city, or wherever it would work. Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, and Arne Nass wrote one guidebook for doing that, called *Thinking Like a Mountain*. It helps people get in touch with the grief we feel for the extinction of all the species we have lost. Back in 2011, I organized a Council of All Beings in the Vermont State House because I felt the voices of all beings should have a legitimate place where decisions are made. People attended in costumes, representing animals and plants; I spoke for future generations. We passed legislation similar to what has worked in Ecuador and Costa Rica, where nature is given legal standing, legal rights, and all our rights to a healthy environment are affirmed. For some time after that, when climate legislation was being discussed, some of the Council members, like Polar Bear, showed up in the mask and sat in the gallery.

Our needs drive the larger systems, but those systems do not voluntarily offer us the choices we would like to have, especially if such choices involve increased costs and lower profits. We need to demand the change we want. We can do that by voting with our dollars. Stop buying industrial meat and other industrial food products. Support local farms, local food producers, and organic and regenerative food; eat as simply as you can. The food system represents more than 40% of the greenhouse emissions driving climate change. We need to change what we eat, and we need to do it as fast as we can. Start a dinner club with your friends in which you take turns cooking. Learn how to prepare whole foods. Shop the edge of the store, not the middle. Every changed habit helps.

Many cities and towns are working on biodiversity preservation by protecting wildlife corridors and creating new links where human occupation has blocked a route. Inventory local habitats and the natural communities that live there. Identify areas where sensitive species have food in the winter, for example, or a gathering place in the summer. Protect and expand them. Nature grows in lots of new places when conditions are right. "Bioblitzes" are community activities where over 48 hours,

everyone works together to identify as many species as possible, recording them and counting subsets and totals. You can even make bioblitzes into an annual festival, so that you develop a baseline of species and know when they are threatened.

I agree with Eileen Crist that we need to abolish CAFOs and protect wild animals in their natural habitats. If those goals are to be reached, the smaller, intermediate steps can move us in that direction. Further, expanding the lands that are returned to indigenous communities and Black people to make reparations for the legacy of colonization and slavery will also help animals and nature thrive. We've occupied Wall Street. What about Occupy Industrial Agriculture?

About the Author



Gwendolyn Hallsmith is founder and executive director of Global Community Initiatives. She is the author of six books on sustainable community development and has worked all over the world to foster local economies, good governance, and healthy ecosystems. She founded Vermonters for a New Economy to work on economic solutions at the state level, and the Headwaters Garden and Learning Center, an ecovillage in Cabot, VT. She has a master's degree in Public Policy from Brown University.

About the Publication

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