

My name is Todd Fiorentino and I hope to change the way people think about animals. Please join me in this mission.

Eco-Manifesto: Leave Animals Alone

I was talking to a friend from high school, who remarked, “we had it right back then, you know.” At the time, the comment seemed unremarkable. But later, I found myself considering it further. As I look at the foolish behavior of adults on the world stage and even in my own social circles, it’s clear to me, yes, seeing things freshly, with clear eyes, is a gift.

If we are to return to a social conscience, there will have to be a groundswell movement, a change in how we treat all sentient beings.

The issue of enslaving, exploiting and killing animals is a big one. So it’s important to take it in pieces.

The extinction spasm that humans have touched off, threatens so many life forms, but it also diminishes the joy, fascination and beauty of life. We don’t know what we’re losing. For our children and grandchildren to never see or experience wild things, is a loss that has no words. Do we want a future of mirror-image developments, malls, plastic, canned experiences and biological boredom?

Sharing the earth and healing our relationship with animals, of all kinds, is perhaps the greatest spiritual mission we have before us at this very moment. We are desensitized. We have normalized abuse. Ironically, some of the main culprits, claim they are trying to help animals; they are the good guys in all of this. As if training dolphins to dance and sing for us, at places like SeaWorld San Diego, is just a fun and noble endeavor. You know who else white culture used to tell to sing and dance?

Consider the Montreal Biodome. Here, they put secretive animals like the Canada Lynx into captivity, for display. These animals pace incessantly back and forth as a result; I saw something similar in Spain with a captured fox.

In Florida, at Sarasota Jungle Gardens Zoo, the keepers brought out a baby alligator for the kids and paraded him around with electrical tape wrapped around his mouth as if this was perfectly normal. In the Philippines, a large gorilla is behind bars, growing old in a jail as tourists take selfies.

But actually, you don’t have to travel the world to see animal abuse. What about roadkill? We insist on building right next to waterways and then we’re surprised that animals want to come for a drink at night. Stroll through the supermarket and you see lobsters stacked on top of each other, not moving, pincers rubber banded shut, waiting for death.

Still, some people have a conscience. When the circus came to Boston some years ago, a woman and her daughter held a sign outside: "Against the Circus." And Cirque De Soleil showed you can have a wonderful "circus" without live animals.

Animal experimentation is another frontier of corruption. With an out of control human population, we still insist on prolonging life into the 80's and 90's using drugs and heroics, despite the drop in quality of life. Many of these drugs were tested on animals in sick experiments to find the lethal dose. Meanwhile, abortion, a voluntary population measure, is railed against without any acknowledgment of ecology. And euthanasia is still illegal in most states.

A pig heart was recently "grown" and transplanted into a human. The headline was astounding: 'Pig Heart Recipient Stabbed a Man...' [NY Daily News]. Aside from showing how far afield and sensational our news has become, we miss the point on bio-ethics. The question is whether we should be creating spare body parts for ourselves at all by cross-breeding animals. Humans now select what species live and die. And, you guessed it, humans should live and multiply out of control, at the expense of all other species. The sanctity of human life. It's right in the Bible.

Many colleges and universities experiment on animals. I remember touring my cousin's school and seeing the dark chambers below where animals were kept. In torturing these animals, someone will get their doctorate and show the world how smart they are. It should end. We don't have the right. Could animal experiments prolong human life? Maybe, sometimes, but it's not worth the cost. Many of our medical problems are self-induced--diet and lifestyle related; let's start with that.

We sacrifice our ethics and morals for a few extra years. We must accept limits. The drug companies and their investors will make less money, yes, but it's worth it.

The factory farm system we've developed is disturbing and often hidden. We put portholes into cows; we impregnate then separate mothers from their young so we can take their milk. Animals are over-crowded because free-range toughens meat and burns calories which costs money; the crowding creates the need for antibiotics; they are given growth hormones to increase yield; we dunk them in pesticides, then comes the sick methods of slaughter.

We should leave animals alone. Protein is abundant in many beans and vegetables, not just meat. Even the most egregious violations against animals, such as veal and foie gras production, somehow, as a society, we can't get consensus. Because we want to eat these "delicacies." Freedom, right? It's the American way. We have freedom, the animals don't.

Where did all of the buffalo go? "By the end of the 19th century, only 300 buffalo were left in the wild." [Smithsonian Magazine] The animals that we've "disappeared" are mainly predators, but there are some docile and trusting ones mixed in. Sad. The predators scared us. Humans feared coyotes, wolves, hyenas and so on. But these animals have the same rights to this earth

as we do. While it may be a bit uncomfortable, and occasionally unsafe, losing that wildness hurts more.

Monbiot, the author of *Ferile*, refers to “ecological boredom.” I think he’s on to something. As we try to kill anything and everything that might pose a threat to us (poisoning insects, hunting, etc.), we are homogenizing the world. We lose the very thing that makes life exciting--the experience of new and wild and different beings. Beings that are intrinsically valuable, not a means to our end.

Some people seem happy strolling around malls and shopping endlessly for crap they don’t need. But for those of us who don’t get joy that way, we need to preserve our natural world.

A big part of ‘the miss’ here is that we’ve elevated humankind to a status that we really don’t have. It’s convenient and neat to think that we are at the apex of everything--the smartest, most evolved, stewards of all life, but it’s not true. In fact, each time we try to dream up something that makes us better, we find an animal who can do it. Use of tools? No. Flying? No. Communication? No. Sonar? No. Opposable thumbs? No. Reasoning? No. Navigating? No. Learning? No. Love? No. The idea that our intellect sets us apart also doesn’t hold because no one is claiming we should remove rights from babies or those with cognitive disabilities.

Our life is no more valuable than a flea as far as the universe is concerned. But this myth that we perpetuate, gives us free license to do almost anything and everything. We can animal test because our life is more valuable. We can run slaughterhouses because our life is more valuable. We can destroy habitat because our life is more valuable. We can pollute the oceans and cut down the rainforests because our life is more valuable.

The primacy of economic thinking has been a disaster for the natural world. Environmentalists are forced to play the economic game (carbon credits, monetizing ecosystem values, etc.) because they know altruism, philosophy and ethics take a backseat. Somehow, ethics is likened to emotional thinking, as if emotion and empathy is a bad thing. It’s not logical, not scientific. Save the rainforest because perhaps there is a new drug that could be exploited for us to add even more time to our lengthy lifespan. We can’t appeal to beauty or inspiration; you can’t say clean air and water just make me feel good.

Or take food, for instance... most people don’t understand what’s in the food they buy. What if food at the supermarket said, ‘corn treated with malathion’ or ‘sprayed with glyphosate.’ Even if a plant has been made resistant to a given pesticide or herbicide and will survive treatment, the chemical remains on the crop you are about to eat. Have you been made resistant? Do you think the animals that graze or insects that nibble on this chemical food got the memo?

Thinking animals and insects are secondary leads to so many bad decisions. What if it’s all just life and there is no hierarchy? With a combination of in-group bias, the Bible, anthropocentrism and dissonance, we have convinced ourselves of falsehoods because we

derive benefit. Look how long it took to do away with slavery. The white landed gentry did not want to give up free labor. They were willing to overlook the ethics to gain advantage.

Society is actively selecting winners and losers based on flawed logic. We are waging war against certain species. What really makes an animal “wild” versus “domestic” versus “livestock?” Livestock is an odd term in itself; we use the pronoun “it” for animals; nature is now “natural resources,” defined in relation to us, and in need of “management.” Yes, nature needs management now because we’ve tinkered so heavily with it! We’ve moved invasive species all over the world and created massive imbalances.

Why are coyotes pushed to the margins while bunnies thrive? Aww, bunnies are cute, right? And they pose no threat to us.

Factory farming, hunting for sport, zoos, circuses, animal experimentation--all of it must be stopped! Change means sacrifice and it *can* conflict with our freedoms, which we cherish above all else in American society. But what if our freedoms trample on others? No one really has limitless freedom; we have obligations. To live in harmony with our planet means limiting freedoms, but it also means incredible beauty, a planet teeming with life and children who grow up with benevolent and wise parents, mentors. Children who play in the wilderness, not with virtual reality headsets and screens and controllers. Children who have new unique individual experiences, not the same ones that 10,000 others said were great online.

Consider pets. How can humans be so loving to their pets, pay thousands of dollars for surgeries, feed and walk them religiously, cuddle, and yet, treat other animals as if they have zero rights? Our laws also reflect this inequality. People always say, well, if you had such and such medical condition, you would be all for animal experimentation to develop new drugs. No, I wouldn’t, because it’s a line we have to set and not cross no matter what.

With meat, the change I am talking about will be difficult for cultural reasons, but we must try.

Our love of efficiency has carried over to industries involving sentient beings, and it’s a bad fit. Efficiency is a terrible thing on the factory farm. To kill faster, to strip the feathers quicker; it’s all pretty sick. The slower way of farming was a better one. No robots. No machines. No chemicals. Again, it’s population, our tendency to look for technological fixes, laziness and a profit driven system that leads us astray.

Small scale operations where farmers did not mistreat animals and let them live out their lives... this is what we’ve gotten away from.

What are we really teaching our children when we visit a zoo? It’s not a biology lesson; what we’re saying is that it’s okay to jail animals. It’s okay to use them for our delight and make them do stupid stuff. When zoos say they are trying to save animals, we have to look through this. Keeping a few showcase animals, because we’ve decimated the rest, and destroyed their

habitat, so we can “remember,” and say, ‘see, they’re still here, don’t worry, they’re not gone,’ is dumb. It takes vast genetic diversity to sustain a species.

Economic, cultural and societal change is needed to tackle this problem. Covid was a wake up call for the world. A decision made across the globe can affect everyone. These outdoor wild animal markets, in China and elsewhere, are the breeding grounds for viruses and mutation. All it takes is for a butcher to have a cut on his arm (unlikely for someone whose main tool is a knife?) and animal blood can mingle with human. The virus reproduces and transmits. NPR ran a stunning article that pointed to the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan, China as the source of SARS-CoV-2:

The Headline: Striking new evidence points to Wuhan seafood market as the pandemic's origin point, March 3, 2022

In this article, reporter Michaela Douclev explains--conditions were ripe for cross-species transmission, zoonotic disease. Raccoon dogs, chickens, a red fox--stacked in cages. Then, the slaughter areas and surfaces, which tested positive for the virus, where a butcher perhaps forgot to wash his hands or rubbed his eyes. In December of 2019, this live animal market was the site of a massive Covid outbreak.

Before Covid, there was bird flu, swine flu, mad cow disease and on and on. If those viruses mutate, we could see more disastrous consequences.

We grow up eating meat. We grow up using products that were tested on animals. We grow up with zoos and circuses. Yet, we are told to treat our pets with love and respect; actually, you can get jail time for abusing your pet. But other animals, well, let’s just leave them out, right? They have no voice to complain. It’s not as if a pig or chicken or cow will hire a lawyer. And the “smart” Ph.D.’s at universities engage in their sick tests to prove God knows what. The rainforest gets cut down; the oceans are loaded with plastics; we overfish the seas; the extinction spasm continues.

We are no longer small groups of subsistence hunters. Their impact was negligible because populations were low and they took what they needed; without refrigeration, they had to hunt each day. Compare this to massive factory farms and slaughterhouses out west. Compare this to the huge nets and long lines and radar used by fishermen who rely heavily on technology to grab the biggest catch. Meanwhile, the farmers program their GPS robot tractors to plow the fields and spray.

If you don’t feel like the system is broken, you’re not paying attention. Harvesting and creating hybrids of animals, so we can use them for spare parts on a 65 or 70 year old man or woman who has already led a full life, is bizarre. Don’t let the medical complex convince you otherwise. We go to such heroic efforts to save any human life no matter what, while completely devaluing animals.

The drug companies profit on our poor lifestyles, ready and willing to sell us drugs to counter obesity, diabetes, cancer and asthma. In our reactionary society, we fail to address the causes of these ailments--air pollution, a high fat/high sugar diet, a sedentary technological life, the manufacture and improper disposal of toxics. Shouldn't oncologists be leading the charge against toxics in our environment?

As a final note, I want to acknowledge something. I have participated in most of the activities that I am railing against in this eco-manifesto. Despite this, I am calling for change in myself and humankind. There were lots of reasons. When you are young, in a group of five or six, and everyone wants to go to the zoo or circus or get burgers, it's pretty hard to say, "um, mom, dad, I really don't think we should go because animals aren't for our entertainment or pleasure, and they really shouldn't be held captive either." So I didn't. But I wish I did, because these are conversations we should have and actions we should take.

I ate many times at McDonald's and Burger King growing up. My dad wasn't a great cook; we were often rushed; it was cheap. It's quite an allure when you add it all up. But it wasn't right. And, it wasn't good for me.

Making alternative products widely available, inexpensive and flavorful is a huge calling for the future. I've had falafel sandwiches that were so good, I wouldn't trade it for any burger. Oat milk tastes better than cow's milk.

Of course, it's hard to know where to start. Information and awareness, so far, hasn't done the job. There are 'gag rules,' surrounding factory farms, so workers aren't free to talk about what they see. Some consumers are aware and still continue eating meat (desensitization, cultural pressure, humans at the apex thinking). Grandma's favorite recipe passed on for generations, which called for meat... or that famous Southern barbecue. But preferences change. For instance, tofu is eaten much more widely now than say in the 60's.

What if high schools taught vegetarian/vegan principles and cooking techniques, global economics, environmental studies? It would be a good start. What if high schools took field trips to factory farms?

The gutting of investigative journalism has also stood in the way of change. As the media is taken over by Internet giants and hedge fund managers, the independent press is really in jeopardy. As a result, we have a glut of bad information with political slants. We have to sift through for the pearls. What if the government subsidized investigative journalism instead of oil, gas and meat?

Can you imagine leafing through a book, in the future, and explaining to your grandchildren, 'yes, this is what a tuna looked like'--beautiful silver creatures of the deep. No more. It's already happening with the big cats of Africa, Asia, South and Central America--endangered or near extinction due to poaching and habitat loss. Predators, we know, are the first to go (as they compete with humans) and animals are shot for "trespassing."

The Green Party should've been the vehicle to make this change, but they don't seem to have the horsepower. Plus, they shy away from these issues. We need a *movement*, the exact topic of this conference, a political movement, a departure from the old way of thinking; protest and demonstrations; whistleblowers from factory farms and animal testing labs; wilderness and freedom--not just for us.

If this manifesto rings true to you, and you want to do something about it, let's meet up. Maybe a given city could be designated as, "An Animal Rights City" where the town leaders have signed on to various principles. Colleges could do the same. Perhaps we can create a 501c3 and raise funds to tackle these issues. We could start with the extinction challenge. What do people need in the countries where extinction is happening? What is driving extinction? How do we stop habitat loss and poaching?

We can move to creating a vegan/vegetarian culture; shutting down zoos and circuses; stopping animal experimentation; encouraging medical ethics; going organic; saving bees; using biodegradable packaging; eliminating high tech fishing; mitigating roadkill; erasing live animal markets where animals are butchered then sold and viruses mutate; allowing for voluntary population reduction techniques such as euthanasia and abortion; increasing investigative journalism; promoting milk alternatives; banning veal and foie gras; changing the political discourse from the same redundant topics of trade, immigration, taxes, crime and economy; making global environmental issues and animal rights central.