

Eco-Manifesto: Leave Animals Alone

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

Some time ago, 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 thought and how we treat all sentient beings. The Internet has made things worse. There’s just no way around it. And politics, in it’s current form, with a hyper-focus on taxation, crawling along addressing the same recycled issues over and over, won’t solve it.

The issue of enslaving, exploiting and killing animals is a big one. So it’s important to take it in pieces and work methodically. The list will never be complete, but we have to start somewhere.

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 for me. Do we want a future of mirror-image developments, malls, plastic, canned experiences and biological boredom?

The manufacture and proliferation of chemicals, without any plan for disposal, is leading to cancer. Polluted habitats result. Our insatiable consumer society mistakenly assumes that if it’s on the market, it must be safe. While the average homeowner diligently recycles, the government issues massive permits that allow companies to pollute our rivers, streams and even drinking water and air.

Healthcare, housing and food/water. Those three things should not be dependent on money. A basic level of all three must be considered a human right. Remarkably, most people do not understand the monetary system they utilize every day. Wall Street, how the Federal Reserve can simply print more money, or the way valuation is set, are a mystery to the average Joe.

Having money, is generally a prerequisite to making money.

Inequality drives environmental problems. As a response, we have insisted on a “politically correct” culture in colleges and on the Internet. But this does not solve the problem. Racism is rampant. Sexism is rampant. Xenophobia is rampant. All it took was for one leader (Trump) to step forward and espouse these beliefs and wouldn’t you know it, millions followed in his wake. Hiding these beliefs does not get rid of them.

You have to meet people where they are--beliefs are often illogical, emotional, cultural, based on upbringing and families. (This links to the environmental crisis; we grow up eating meat and going to zoos.) You see a "foreigner" in an expensive car and think, 'hey, I'm an American, and immigrants are doing better than me.' After Trump it became clear that about half the population was really just waiting for a leader to give them permission to champion their racist, sexist and xenophobic beliefs. They got permission and now we know more about our true America and who our neighbors really are.

Technology magnifies these problems. Social media and cell phones have been so negative for kids and adults. Wasn't it great, in the past, to be unreachable? The constant state of distraction; the gambling-like cognitive reward; the searching for social validation. It's problematic on so many levels. While the tech companies sell our data and formulate more ways to get us to buy something we don't need, a child's self concept is destroyed in just a few clicks. Like. Unfriend. Adults are swept away in overworking and ignore their kids. Kids develop a warped self concept; they trade-in playing in the fields for a screen and a controller. Engagement with the natural world lessens and therefore the desire to save it. All of those adventures and experiences go unknown.

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 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 a popular 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 (one associate of mine told me, "a deer hit my car" as he lamented the bills he would have to pay)? 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. A woman and her daughter stood in Boston outside of the circus with a simple sign: "Against Zoos." We need more of this.

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 (despite the drop in quality of

life) through drugs and surgeries and heroics; most of these drugs were tested on animals in sick experiments to find the lethal dose, for instance. Abortion, a voluntary population measure, is railed against by nearly half of the U.S. population without any acknowledgment of population and ecology. Euthanasia is still illegal in so many states.

A pig heart was recently “grown” and transplanted into a human. The transplant recipient had knifed someone in years previous. The *Washington Post* article, “The Ethics of a Second Chance...” (Jan. 13, 2022) by Johnson and Wan, was remarkable for many reasons. Aside from showing us how far afield and sensational our news has become, it shows, we miss the point again and again 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 and diet/lifestyle related; let’s start with that.) We sacrifice our ethics and morals for a few extra years. Accept limits. The drug companies are the culprits. Yes, their investors will make less money. But the world will be a better place.

The factory farm system we’ve developed is disturbing and often hidden. We put portholes into cows; we separate mothers from their young so we can take their milk. We should publicize how animals are crowded (free-range toughens meat and burns calories which costs “farmers” money), given growth hormones, injected with antibiotics (which wouldn’t be needed except for the conditions), dunked in pesticides, and the sick methods of slaughter. Plus, toxic runoff results and methane is released.

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.

If we could reconnect people to the natural world, we would see less abuse. From the Tiber to the Hoosic, governments love to separate people from their rivers, usually in the name of saving houses from flooding. Concrete and fences result. It’s not that we built too close to the water, it’s that we need multi-million dollar Army Corps of Engineers projects to save towns from the wild river. The government steps in and large insurance companies are saved.

The result? It’s pretty hard to go play in the river. On a trip to California, as a youth, I remember being surprised by all of the fences around various parts of the Cascade Mountains.

You can't just venture into the wilderness. You have to drive to a park ranger booth, pay money to enter, get a parking pass, sign in, make sure you are out by a certain time, only stay on the trail, and on and on. I expect in the future we will just put on a virtual reality headset to visit national parks.

Where did all of the buffalo go? The animals that we've "disappeared" are mainly predators, but there's also some docile and trusting ones mixed in. Sad. The predators scared us. Humans feared coyotes, wolves, hyenas and on and on. But they have the same rights to this earth as we do. While it may be a bit uncomfortable, and occasionally unsafe, losing that wilderness hurts more. Meanwhile, we lament the out of control deer population, hmmm...

Monbiot, the author of *Ferile*, refers to "ecological boredom." I think he's on to something there. As we try to kill anything and everything that might pose a threat to us (spreading poison to kill insects; hunting; destroying habitat), we are homogenizing the world. Add to this, that we now move invasives all over the globe, and this monocrop mentality builds. We champion diversity, but our actions don't back it up. And 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: we are the smartest, the most evolved, the steward of all life, but it's not true. In fact, each time we try to dream up something that makes us better, it seems 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. Plus, no one is saying we should remove rights from babies or those with cognitive disabilities. The argument doesn't hold up.

Our life is no more valuable than that of 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. Let's draw an analogy. A pacifist might consider, we should never bomb any population because the next Einstein or Picasso may be below. That's valid, but let's delve deeper and connect it. We shouldn't cause a species to go extinct because you don't know if it holds the key to some future problem (e.g. oil eating microbes). But let's look at the flipside. Perhaps you don't save a life based on talent, you save it because you care, you are equals and it doesn't have to be of value to you. The universe put it there. And so, it exists.

Still, in our society, environmentalists are forced to play the economic game (e.g. carbon credits, monetary 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 the loss of beauty and the inspiration for art; you can't say clean air and water just make me feel good.

Think of all the products being developed right now as we speak, with no disposal plan. So many objects run on batteries now. It seems every house needs six screens. Imagine all of the toxins and heavy metals that will go straight to an incinerator or landfill, leech into our air and water, then get ingested by fish, plants, animals and us. What if there were signs on consumer goods, at every Home Depot and Walmart, saying 'made with toxics and carcinogens' or 'incineration or landfilling will release poison.'

The same is true for food. 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. Do you think the animals that graze or insects that nibble on this chemical food got the memo?

Again, thinking animals and insects are secondary to us 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.

My cousin lives near the Boundary Waters in Minnesota. She coexists with bears and says that most encounters can be defused by simply clanking some cast iron pans together. What ever happened to nonlethal means? Why can't we coexist? Society is actively selecting winners and losers based on flawed logic and 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 "natural resources," defined in relation to us, and in need of "management." 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.

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. It's an important question. 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 would not, 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. The early slaughterhouse owners actually toured Ford plants to get ideas. 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 rots our society from the core out.

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.

As we toss plastics into the sea (even remote areas now have micro-plastics in the water) and cut down the rainforest, we destroy not only what sustains us, but what makes life worth living. Wild things.

Economic change is needed to tackle this problem. The rich are huge consumers which has a large impact. The poor must make tough decisions about say clearing their land of trees to use as firewood and farmland, or leave it pristine. Basic healthcare, housing and food/water for all is needed. Covid was a wake up call for the world. A decision made across the world 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 from there. NPR ran a stunning article that pointed to the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan, China as the source of SARS-CoV-2:

Striking new evidence points to Wuhan seafood market as the pandemic's origin point, March 3, 2022 4:34 PM ET

In this article, reporter Michaela Douclev explains that 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 so on. If those viruses mutate, we could see disastrous consequences. Our interaction with and relationship to the environment and wildlife is riddled with problems. We've moved invasive species throughout continents and waterways, leading to the demise of ecosystems. The plants and animals that are allowed to survive must benefit us. Monocultures have resulted--coopting huge swaths of land for corn and wheat. We spread chemicals over farmland, then ingest it in our food, while the EPA and FDA tell us that a certain amount of toxics is actually okay for the human body, don't worry about it (threshold). We alter seeds so they can actually emit pesticides. Sounds appetizing.

Life has become cheap. As populations spiral out of control, you see less sympathy for others. Separated by technology, which claims to be "social," distrust grows, social skills diminish, differences are emphasized and blame is assigned. Our children become hypnotized. Adults become locked in material competition with their neighbors, co-workers and friends. Kids mirror this. We lose sight of what's important. Online companies sell our data and marketing becomes targeted, efficient.

Parents choose to work more in pursuit of even more material objects rather than spending time with family. Families suffer with the divorce rate around 45% in the U.S. All for an economic system that most people don't even understand. Does the average Joe know the role of central banks in our global economy? Does he understand how or why we can just print more money? Do high schools teach global monetary policy or the evolution of money from bartering to where we are today?

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 trawling nets that scrape the ocean floor 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 (technology-driven) obesity, diabetes (high fat, high sugar diet), cancer (toxic products, improper disposal) and asthma (air pollution).

While you buy an e-car and recycle, corporations are given massive permits to pollute our waters and air with thousands, yes thousands! of tons of chemicals. But don't worry, you probably don't even have access to your local river anyway!

I remember meeting an organic farmer who told me, "I grow some for the insects and some for the humans," which always struck me as very wise. After all, farmers rely on insects, especially bees to pollinate their crops. Bees, too, are facing widespread population decline due to chemicals. In some cases, organic farming means crop losses of 10-15%, but he accepted this.

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.

It's hard to know where to start. Information and awareness, so far, hasn't done the job. There are various '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 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 or animal testing labs?

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. Instead, 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 beasts of the ocean. No more. It's already happening with many of 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 political movement; protest and demonstrations; whistleblowers from factory farms and animal testing labs.

If this manifesto rings true to you, and you want to do something about it, let's meet up. 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; disassembling CAFOs; shutting down zoos and circuses; stopping animal experimentation; conceptualizing a new medical ethics; challenging government permits given to corporations for massive chemical releases into our air and water; reconnecting people with their rivers; going organic; saving bees; moving away from plastics (use compostable corn starch alternatives and increase municipal composting); eliminating high tech fishing which leads to overfishing; erasing live animal markets where animals are butchered/sold and viruses mutate; requiring companies to have a disposal plan for items they make and reduce, eliminate or substitute toxins used in the manufacturing process; allowing for all voluntary population reduction techniques such as euthanasia and abortion; increasing investigative journalism; making a basic level of healthcare, housing and clean food/water available to all; promoting milk alternatives; banning veal and foie gras production; changing the political discourse away from the same redundant five topics (trade, immigration, taxes, crime, economy) and making global environmental issues and animal rights central. This is where we need to go.

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