

Lyons, Keith. *Thinking About Animals*.  
SAFE Magazine (formerly Safeguard).



# thinking about animals

His book has changed lives, saved lives and is considered to be THE book which gave rise to the animal rights movement. Keith Lyons talked to Australian philosopher and author Peter Singer during a recent visit to New Zealand and found out about the person behind *Animal Liberation*.

**Safeguard:** What sort of changes have happened since *Animal Liberation* was first published?

**Peter:** Well, there is now an animal rights movement when there really wasn't one before and there's been some important breakthroughs over animal welfare issues.

The ones you would see most visibly here in New Zealand would be issues like cosmetic testing. Back then there was no awareness of the fact that cosmetics were tested on animals. Now we see many large and reputable companies making a feature of the fact they are cruelty free. Consequently, the number of alternatives to testing on animals has significantly increased too.

There has been considerable changes in certain areas of animal experimentation with many countries implementing some kind of ethics committee to help screen experiments. By all means this still isn't enough but it does mean that some of the other worst experiments that used to be performed on animals have been stopped.

In the area of factory farming - which I think is one of the biggest areas of animal abuse - there has been remarkable improvements in countries like in Britain, where veal stalls have been banned and in America, where the number of intensively farmed calves has dramatically declined. We are seeing

It hasn't come out as a movie, but the bible of the animal rights movement has sold over half a million copies around the world. *Animal Liberation: A new ethic for our treatment of animals* with its distinctive giraffe, elephant and other animals on the cover is found in many bookshelves. It's been translated into all the major European languages. You can get a copy in Japanese or Chinese. Twenty years after it was first published the 256 pages book is still considered the work that gave rise to the animal rights movement and a greater ethical concern about the treatment and eating of animals.

Australian philosopher Peter Singer was 29 and still at Oxford University when *Animal Liberation*

was published back in 1975. Since then he has written and edited another 18 books ranging from *Animal Factories* and *The Great Ape Project*, to *Practical Ethics* and *How Are We To Live? Animal Liberation* was revised in 1991.

Despite his high profile, Singer leads a relatively simple life revolving around his work at the Institute of Ethics and Public Affairs and the Centre for Human Bioethics at Monash University in Melbourne.

He is unassuming and pleasant to meet. During a hectic schedule to promote the battery hen petition he was able to talk about the changes since *Animal Liberation*, the animal rights movement and his own lifestyle to Safeguard magazine.

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the demise of some intensive farming systems like the battery hen cage in Switzerland and sow stalls are now being phased out in Britain, so there have been some sufficient improvements.

The fur trade is another big area where there's been change. The fur industry has really been knocked quite badly with sales in some countries such as the Netherlands down to about 10%. What it's like here I wouldn't know.

**Do you think the exploitation of animals is engrained in our society.**

Yes. It's very deeply engrained. We've always grown up to think that animals are things for us to use in the same way that crops are or other resources. With the exception of some companion animals and some animals that are particularly appealing to us, like seals or dolphins, it's very deeply engrained and it's been that way for a millennium so it's not going to change overnight.

**What would you say to people who say 'why worry about animals when half the human world is starving'?**

As I said you have to look at the numbers and you have to get rid of the prejudice that any issue about human beings is more important than the issue of animals. I'm not saying that the issue of human starvation or others are not huge issues, but you can't automatically assume that they're more important.

There's also the question of how we can change it. We can talk about the issue that brought me over here, there's 2.3 million hens in cages, it's really totally unnecessary, it could just be stopped by an electoral act and stopped by the referendum and then all those hens will be able to live a decent life unconfined.

Now, there's nothing similar that we can do that will be guaranteed to have a corresponding effect on sufficient number of human beings to end their starvation. I'm not really saying one hen is worth one human being, I don't want to get into that sort of comparison. But you have to also talk about the degree of confinement, the degree of suffering,

I think it's a prejudice just to assume that issues relating to animals can't be just as important as issues relating to humans.

**What is so bad about battery hen farming?**

Well basically because of the degree of confinement, I can't think of other areas, except for the way in which breeding sows are kept, in which so many animals are so restricted and so

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prevented from performing the most basic natural functions. I think every animal ought to be able to move around freely, at least to walk a few steps, at least to stretch its limbs. Battery hens can't do this and I think it's a life of constant deprivation and frustration.

The inability to peck around the ground; to scratch the ground; to peck the food, which is something that they naturally spend most of their time doing; the inability to lay an egg in a nest; all of these are real frustrations that we are causing the hens which we don't put any other animals through. It's a long 12-18 months of basically living in hell.

**The animal liberation movement is often seen as being rather urban and not really knowing what goes on at farms. What do you think?**

We get a lot of support from people who are or have been farmers. A couple of hours ago we were out with the battery hen petition outside

the Bodyshop. A man came past and asked what's all this about. We said it was about trying to phase out battery hen cages, and he said "I used to breed hens, that's a cruel way of doing it in those cages" and he signed it.

He was obviously someone who had been involved some years ago. I've spoken to farmers, who tend to be older people, who will say something to me, like, 'yeah I'm not really a farmer any more, I used to be, I sort of enjoyed being with the animals and thought of them as individuals, but you can't do that any more. I would have gone out of business if I hadn't converted my farm to compete with everyone else's operations'. Quite often it's not as though farmers have a choice, they're as much as trapped in the system as the animals are really. I think a lot of farmers understand what we're on about.

**What do you think of the Animal Liberation Front and their actions?**

The ALF have carried out a lot of different actions and much to the benefit of the movement. What I totally deplore are the kind of actions which are life threatening where for example, a bomb is placed under a experimenter's vehicle. I don't think these actions have any place in the animal movement. On the contrary, I think it's very damaging and that it is the wrong thing to do. You ought to show equal concern in the interests of all beings, including vivisectionists.

ALF actions which, for example, provide photographs and video evidence to the public of conditions inside laboratories has proven very instrumental. These actions expose conditions and sometimes stop cruel practices that could not have been stopped by any other ways. Where that's been carefully done in a way that avoids violent confrontation with other people, and so on, I support.

**You've been involved in some direct protest actions. Have these ever turned nasty?**

Yes. Once on a battery hen farm in Victoria where we went in with a television crew to try and publicise

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conditions on the farm. We discovered it was even more overcrowded than Ministry guidelines. That led to a confrontation with the owner's son; the owner was away.

We had been tipped off that he would be away, but his son was there and he came out with a shot gun and demanded the film from my camera. I had been taking shots. He pointed the gun at me and obviously I gave him my camera and he exposed the film and he did the same with the TV crew and blasted their video coverage to pieces. The cameraman however managed to exchange videotapes just in time to give him one that didn't have much on it, so we managed to obtain some footage.

**How do you live? How would you describe your lifestyle?**

I don't think my lifestyle is particularly unusual. I feel it would be nice to live out in the country on a commune and be self-sufficient and so on, but it would also make it impossible for me to do the work I do.

So obviously I compromise. I do grow some vegetables in my back garden, but I can only spend a limited amount of time doing it. I try not to be overly materialistic, but that doesn't mean I don't buy anything new.

Again, if you don't dress in a moderately decent way, particularly when you appear on television, I feel you don't get taken seriously so there's a whole lot of compromise. If I want to come over and influence the campaign about battery hens, I've got to get on to a plane that contributes to the burning of jet fuel and so on.

**How long have you been a vegetarian and what made you stop eating animals?**

I guess I became a vegetarian in 1970 when I meet someone who was a vegetarian who got me to think about the issue of what right have we got to use animals as things for our purposes. That made me think about the whole question. My wife and three children are also vegetarian.

**Is your wife involved in philosophy at all?**

No. She was a school teacher at the time. She's now working for Oxfam. She's never been into philosophy.



Never particularly worked in the animal movement either. Her view was if it was wrong to exploit animals then there was no need to do it. The fact that you're not eating them any more, doesn't mean you have to devote your life to working for them. It's just one fairly small thing to do to stop participating in that sort of exploitation.

**Do you have any companion animals?**

We have a cat called Max, who was a stray who came to us through a friend who seemed to attract strays; she had more of them than she could look after. My daughters at various stages had ex-laboratory rats that would have been used for research experiments. They're quite endearing little things too, when you get to know them.

**How do you feel when people come up to you and say, after reading your books, become vegetarians and change their lives.**

It gives me a real sense of fulfilment. I feel I've been able to achieve something by writing books on the philosophical arguments of animal rights that encourages people to make personal changes to their lifestyle that they would not normally do. People who are convinced by the book aren't changing because it's in their interests, they're changing because they really believe in not exploiting animals further. When you consider that many people regard

humans beings as entirely selfish and that we never do anything else unselfish, then you see a philosophical argument can actually move people to change their lives in this way. It's really encouraging to feel that I had a part in this move.

**What groups are you currently involved with?**

I was recently appointed the President of the Australian New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies (ANZFAS) which is an umbrella group for a lot of different animal groups of Australia and New Zealand. I was for many years, President of Animal Liberation (Victoria). I'm a member of lots of other groups. I'm involved with the Greens, politically.

**What motivates you to do your work?**

I find it interesting, stimulating and satisfying. I like to feel I'm on the right side and doing something for it. Life would be a bit boring if you didn't get involved in any issues or causes that you believed in.

*Thanks to Nicky for transcribing the tape.*

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