

## A Reply to "Animal Welfare, Rights and 'Liberation'" by M.W. Fox

Jim Mason

Michael Fox's editorial correctly points out some of the advantages and disadvantages (and confusion) associated with the recent emergence of the concepts of animal rights and liberation. I agree with him that the concept of rights is, in some respects, an improvement over the traditional welfare/cruelty perspective. I do not, however, share his pessimism about animal liberation and his opinions about the value of that trend in our movement. I feel that this latter development in perspectives and in tactics provides a simple but better grounded basis for a progressive world view and environmental ethic.

Though it is hardly mature, the rights approach already appears stale — merely the same old animal welfare approach in updated, trendy language. Indeed, most of our large animal welfare organizations have already adopted animal “rights” rhetoric, yet they have made no changes in outlook, policies or programs. The present state of the rights concept lends itself to this chameleonic behavior. Philosophers are unlikely ever to settle the arguments about whether “rights” exist at all and if they do, why they do. In this conceptual trap animals quite probably will not have it much better than under the traditional welfare/cruelty approach. Though it does, as Dr. Fox points out, offer some advantages, the rights concept is at bottom poorly understood at all levels of intellect and education; “rights” are soft, slippery and hard to define. When all is said and done, animals will achieve only those “rights” that we who own, use and manipulate them are willing to give.

That is why some of us press the radical, “idealistic” and, I suppose, somewhat frightening notion that animals should be “liberated” from the human economy. While the rest of society seems to be steadfast in its exploration of ways either to enslave or to exterminate animals, we demand (more and more vociferously) a sharp change in direction that would explore ways to *relieve* animals of and protect them from our scientific, technological and economic impact. Science and technology under the guidance of progressive morality rendered human slavery unjust and obsolete. Why stop there? As long as human society’s outlook toward and relationships with other animals carries the old residue of hierarchy, supremacy, mastery, servitude, property and economic “benefit,” animals will be neither safe nor free (free to move, to respond, to interact, to follow instinctive or learned behavior, to reproduce, to evolve and ultimately to live at all); no amount or kind of “rights” can really improve their lot. Slaves had a few insignificant “rights,” but none substantial enough to free them, nor to end the injustice and brutality inherent in the *institution* of slavery.

For the human animal, the path of animal liberation would offer benefits both cultural and spiritual (not to mention technological). We would no longer need to subjugate the beast, whether within or without. We could abandon the myths, rationalizations and defenses constructed to ease the anxious conscience of an animal-dependent, animal-exploitative society. We would then be in a position to end our fear, hostility and alienation toward animals and the living world so that we could know and live with them as well as with the animal within ourselves. Under a liberationist restructuring of human/animal perspectives and relations, we would be forced to see the natural world as it truly is in the purest scientific sense, without human-centered bias. Of course, we would have to drastically change our outlook, habits... our ways, but this is exactly what many recent thinkers are saying we must do if we are to avoid some sort of global disaster, whether by nuclear, chemical, social or one of the many other means so ready and available these days.

How radical, idealistic or “far out” one’s thoughts and actions are in this age depends on how bad one believes things to be and how strongly one yearns and struggles for a resolution in favor of an acceptable kind of survival. The general drift of events today tends to call for a radical response, even if that “polarizes” society. Somehow, the issue of survival must be made clear, and it must be acted upon.