Are We Really A Nation of Animal Lovers?

Are Americans really animal lovers? Follow the money trail.

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Judging by the sales of products like gourmet cat foods and the proliferation of doggie day spas, Americans are gaga over pets. But are we really a nation of animal lovers?

In some ways, yes. Sixty-five percent of households in the United States include a pet, and over half of dogs and cats sleep in their owners' beds. (My cat Tilly is one of them.) In fact, including pet fish, more animals than people reside in American homes. Public opinion polls also indicate most Americans are "pro-animal." For example, a 2008 survey by the Humane Research Council, one of the best sources of information about animal issues, found that nearly three out of four Americans feel that we should eventually "eliminate all forms of animal cruelty and suffering." And in 2008, Californians defeated legislation that would allow gays and lesbians to marry, but overwhelmingly voted for a proposition what would make life better for the state's chickens and pigs.

Google's nifty new research tool, Ngram Viewer (which I described in a previous PT blog post) shows that our concern for the well-being of animals has dramatically increased in recent years. Ngram Viewer tracks historical shifts in what people are thinking via changes in the relative frequencies that words and phrases in the gazillion books in the Google Book data base. When I typed the phrase "animal welfare" into the Ngram search box, the graph below magically appeared on my computer screen. As you can see, our collective concern for animals began to shot up soon after the 1975 publication Animal Liberation, the book by philosopher Peter Singer that jump-started the modern animal protection movement.
The growth of the animal protection movement.

Now the Bad News....

Unfortunately for animals, however, these increases in our concern for other species may be more apparent than real. For example, you might think that as a society's love for animals goes up, the number killed because they taste good would decline. Not true.

In 1975, three billion furry and feathered creatures died for the dining pleasure of Americans; now, however, we eat nearly 10 billion animals a year. The reason is that the 20% drop in the number of cattle killed annually since the 1970s has been offset by a 200% increase in the number of chickens we eat. In short, as our desire to protect animals has increased, so has our desire to eat them. (Despite media claims that Americans *en masse* are forsaking hamburgers for tofu, fewer than three percent of Americans are true vegetarians, a number that has been surprisingly stable for at least 10 years.)

The Money Trail...

But if you really want to know how we feel about animals, follow the money. According to the Center of Philanthropy at Indiana University, Americans donated about $300 billion dollars to charitable organizations and assorted good causes in 2009. However, only 2% of these funds ($6 billion) went to all of America's environmental and animal-related organizations combined. And less than a third of these funds went towards animal protection and advocacy.
Now, contrast the money we spend each year to protect animals with the amount we spend on killing them. First, there is the $76 billion that American spend on hunting and fishing-related expenses (guns, ammo, travel, etc.). Then throw in the $160 billion we fork out for the flesh of cows, pigs, chickens and poultry. Finally, add in the $70 billion we spend to eat creatures that live in the sea, and it looks like the animal death industry comes in at slightly over $300 billion a year. (Note - this does not include money earmarked for other consumptive uses of animals, such as pest control or biomedical research.)

In short - each year Americans spend 150 times more money on killing animals that on saving them.

So, even if we include the $48 billion Americans spend each year on our pets, the money trail shows that, despite our professed love of animals and the sincere efforts of animal protectionists, our society values animals less as objects of affection than, well...objects.
Moral Hypocrisy on a Grand Scale?

In his book, The Happiness Hypothesis, the University of Virginia psychologist Jonathan Haidt asks whether we are all hypocrites in matters of morality. While I don't like the idea, when it comes to the treatment of the animals in our lives, the answer -- at least for most of us -- seems to be yes.