

Let's talk about the animals

The UW-Madison should agree to debate the use of critters as research subjects

Last week, the national group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals put out a top ten list of “the worst offenders of abuse of animals” among U.S. universities. Number one on the list: the UW-Madison.

PETA rips the UW for federal Animal Welfare Act violations, the large number of animals it kills and/or subjects to painful and invasive experiments, and its “unwillingness to make humane improvements.”

No one who knows how such lists are put together, or why, would regard this ranking as authoritative. But neither is it arbitrary. The UW-Madison, which annually uses about 2,000 monkeys, 400 dogs, 500 rabbits and thousands of other animals as research subjects, has indeed distinguished itself in this area, in troubling ways:

- ◆ In 2003, the state agreed to pay \$260,000 to settle a lawsuit by a former assistant research veterinarian at the UW's National Primate Research Laboratory who alleged she was fired for raising concerns about the “cruel and inhumane” treatment of monkeys.
- ◆ In 2004, the university imposed a two-year animal-use suspension on researcher Ei Terasawa following the deaths of three monkeys, one of whom died in a restraint chair while a technician took an unapproved break.
- ◆ In July 2004, three marmoset monkeys were scalded to death when staff failed to remove the animals before cleaning their cages. Six months later, the same thing happened to a New Zealand white rabbit.
- ◆ In early 2005, 10 cows died from neglect at a UW-Madison research farm. The researcher's animal-use privileges were temporarily revoked.
- ◆ Last November, UW-Madison faculty member Goran Hellekant sued Chancellor John Wiley, challenging the UW's enforcement of animal welfare rules. Hellekant, who cuts into monkeys to study artificial sweeteners, claims he's been disciplined for past violations; the UW denies this.
- ◆ UW Prof. John Webster is now studying the lethality of Taser stun guns, using pigs as subjects. One of the study's consultants was booted for having an undisclosed role as top medical officer to a Taser manufacturer.

Even without these problems — some of which, it should be noted, came to light because UW officials took corrective action — there is ample reason to examine and debate the use of animals as research subjects.

How animals are treated says something about our values as a society, our moral character. Serious questions have been raised about the usefulness of this research and the conditions animals endure. The issue merits constant review and debate.

The problem: The UW seems far more interested in demonizing its critics than in having an open and honest exchange of ideas.

Recently, I attended an information session sponsored by the Alliance for Animals' Primate Freedom Project. Part of the program consisted of activist Rick Marolt recounting failed efforts to get UW research advocates to debate.

For an archive of *Isthmus'* coverage regarding UW-Madison animal research, see thedailypage.com.

Marolt's conclusion: UW officials are afraid, realizing that an informed public would reject the university's animal research. As he put it, "They have nothing to gain and they have a lot to lose and a lot to hide."

Perhaps. But the proponents of UW research I've spoken to — including Primate Center director Joe Kemnitz and Dr. Eric Sandgren, who chairs the UW's All-Campus Animal Care and Use Committee — strike me as thoughtful and persuasive. They could, I think, more than hold their own in a debate. Which makes their reluctance to agree to one especially perplexing.

A few months back, a UW researcher publicly cited Wiley's "offer of open discussion regarding the current necessity of animal research." Local primate activist Rick Bogle sought to take him up on this, asking for a debate. Wiley shot this down: "There was never an offer on my part, nor anyone else from the university that I am aware of, to debate the issue publicly with you or anyone."

Does Wiley not realize how small-minded this makes him seem? Is he not ashamed at what it says about his own lack of confidence in the ability of his institution to face criticism and defend its actions?

Sandgren, too, stepped back from discussions he had begun toward a series of debates with research critics. Like Wiley, he blames activists — including Bogle — who last fall broadcast footage of monkey mistreatment outside the homes of a half-dozen UW researchers, an action intended to embarrass and stigmatize.

“That caused us to lose interest,” says Sandgren, who does not want to be seen as condoning or rewarding extreme behavior that caused considerable anger. On the other hand, Sandgren has not foreclosed the possibility of a debate. Indeed, he feels his attendance at some Alliance meetings has helped him better understand how opponents view the university’s ethical obligations regarding animal use.

That is the essence of a free exchange of ideas. It’s also the reason both sides need to stop viewing each other as evil and start having an honest discussion.

The confrontational tactics embraced by Bogle and others do not help their cause, although I understand why people who feel ignored do desperate things. (The group, so far as I know, did not break any laws and in Bogle’s view never came close to being as objectionable as “what’s going on in the labs.”)

Equally distasteful are the persistent efforts of UW officials to peg research critics as violent extremists, although I don’t doubt some researchers are genuinely afraid. I would be too if I believed the UW’s rhetoric, including primate center spokesperson Jordana Lenon’s e-mail to public officials last summer decrying “the illegal acts Mr. Rick Bogle, in particular, has been associated with.” This was outright slander: Bogle has never been charged with any crime.

Both sides need to dial it down. Maybe all of the research now being done is justified because of the benefits it brings to humans and animals. Maybe much of it is pointless and cruel. Maybe some could be eliminated, or conducted more humanely.

These are matters worth exploring, and the public has a role to play. We must not avert our eyes. We must not accept assertion as fact. And we must not let the UW-Madison shirk its responsibility to disclose and discuss what it is doing to defenseless creatures.

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