

The Power of Grassroots Movements

*Speech delivered by Eastern Shore Sanctuary cofounder pattrice jones
at the opening plenary session of the first Grassroots Animal Rights Conference
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I'll start with a story:

It's nighttime in Zululand and the men who have been working in the Thula Thula Exclusive Private Game Reserve are ready to retire, having captured and corralled several antelopes for a breeding program. The frantic antelopes mill about restlessly, not knowing what to do. Out of the twilight comes a herd of elephants. They encircle the enclosure, inspecting the situation. The people keep their distance, apprehensive of the elephants. The matriarch of the herd steps forward and uses her trunk to unlatch the bolts and open the gate. The antelopes escape into the enveloping darkness. The elephants disappear back into the night.

Witnesses use the word "rescue" to describe what they saw that night. Whatever their previous beliefs about animals, they could not help but recognize the deliberate and purposeful nature of the actions of the elephant called "Nana" by local conservationists. Trusting their own eyes, they learned something that most people — including most animal and environmental activists — fail to appreciate: People aren't the only ones acting to undo the damage that people have done.

Putting ourselves in the place of the antelopes that night, we can learn something too: The situation is very scary but help is at hand.

I'm very honored to be speaking on the opening night of this historic conference. I've been asked to share my thoughts on the power of grassroots movements.

Sometimes, it pays to spend a few moments in quiet reflection before jumping into a potentially life-changing experience. So as we head into this busy weekend of activity, I'm going to share with you my reflections on three concepts: power, grassroots, movement.

Power

Power is the capacity to do things.

Power is neutral, like electricity.

Malcolm X thought that power deployed in service of freedom is naturally stronger than power deployed in the service of repression.

I agree. Power spent in the service of repression is like fossil fuel -- unsustainable and destructive -- while power spent in the service of liberation is like photosynthesis -- renewable and creative.

Most movements focus on how to get and use power but our task is more nuanced because, while we have much less power than the institutions and cultural practices we oppose, we already have too much power over those for whom we purport to act.

Thus we must ask both how to get power and how to give it back. We also are obligated to think deeply about how best to deploy the power that we have and obtain.

People acting on their own behalf have the right to let foolishness or vanity or knee-jerk preferences for this or that tactic impede their own progress toward freedom but we have no such right in relation to the animals. We must constantly, rigorously, and unflinchingly seek the truth about the efficacy -- or lack thereof -- of our efforts so far. And we must have the courage and the capacity to make changes as needed.

We do have power already and as we work together we are sure to get more. That means that we are not meeting in a vacuum here. The decisions that we make about what to do for the animals will have real impact on the physical lives of actual animals.

We must never forget that. As we argue for this or that analysis or action, we must always be asking ourselves, "Is this really true? How do I know? What if I'm wrong?"

I'm reminded of the phrase "more power than we want," which was phrased by men in the anti-rape movement. That phrase often comes into my head when I'm making decisions at the sanctuary. Sometimes, I have to make a decision that could have life-or-death consequences for a bird. That makes me feel uncomfortable -- and it should.

You should feel uneasy too. Your decisions about targets and tactics must be just as carefully considered as my decisions about which medication to give a sick bird. In both cases, somebody other than the decision-maker will pay the price in the event of a poor choice.

Grassroots

Five years ago, only a few weeks after accidentally landing in an epicenter of poultry production, my partner and I found chicken in a ditch. Now, five years later, 200 or so birds call our place home.

Every morning at sunrise one or both of us is outside, opening the coops and doing the morning chores. Every evening at sunset one or both of us is outside, doing the evening chores and making sure the ducks and chickens are closed up safely for the night. Every day at midday -- whether it's raining or snowing, whether we're slogging through the mud on a cold grey day or sweating and squinting in the hot summer sun -- we're out there checking on the chickens. Like so many others who run small sanctuaries, we draw no salary, live at edge of poverty, and

often have to cover sanctuary costs out of our own pockets. When I get back home after this conference, I'll actually be sowing grass seed in some of the foraging yards. So, you might think, "it doesn't get any more grassroots than that!"

But you would be wrong. We are not the grassroots. You are not the grassroots.

The animals struggling for their own freedom -- the free elephants trampling genetically modified crops in South Asia; the captive elephants who turn on their trainers; the monkeys in India who recently jeered US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld so loudly that they interfered with his press conference; the free cats and dogs who establish colonies not unlike those of escaped slaves; the baboons who are biting back in South Africa; the sharks who bite back along the shores of the USA; all of the animals who, like Nana, use their brains and their brawn in the service of freedom -- they are the grassroots animal liberation movement. We are just their allies.

And then there are the actual grass roots, the so-called weeds growing where they don't belong, the plants who have evolved resistance to our most poisonous pesticides. They, rather than EarthFirst! or the Earth Liberation Front, are the grassroots environmental movement. We are just their allies.

We must take responsibility for ending human exploitation of the earth and other animals, just as men must actively support women in the struggle against sexism and white people must work hard to divest ourselves of the illegitimate power and privilege that come with being white. Of course, feminists would never tolerate men trying to run the movement against sexism. And, could you imagine what would have happened if, when I was doing anti-racist work, I had run around saying "I am the voice of the Black man"!?

There are no such natural checks on self-importance in the animal liberation movement. We have people running around claiming to be "the voice of the voiceless" as if animals don't have voices of their own. That heroic attitude makes it easy to assume that you know what's best for the animals without stopping to wonder what they might say if you asked them and were able to understand their answers.

That said, of course the organizations represented at this conference are grassroots organizations in structure, as distinguished from the big national groups. Grassroots groups have great potential, as evidenced by the success of various anti-colonial movements that actually succeeded in overthrowing illegitimate governments.

Grassroots groups may be less prone to the kinds of hierarchy and hubris that beset big organizations. But don't think that grassroots equals good. The KKK is a grassroots group and right now, down South, there are truly grassroots campaigns to get evolution out of the science classroom. The power of popular opinion is formidable and, like any electrical current, can be used for good or ill

So, again, we end up having to think about what to do with power. And again we must remember that we are making decisions for beings who ought to be free to determine their own

destinies. I suggest that, instead of considering ourselves "the voice of the voiceless," we think harder about how to listen to the animals for whom we purport to speak.

That may require us to make some changes.

Movement

Which brings us to movements: A movement is a process, not a thing. In other words, movements are actions not objects.

That means that, if we want an effective movement, we all have to be willing to change.

We have to see our efforts as an ongoing experiment in effective activism. We have to use trial-and-error, understanding that we might be in error and being willing to change our ways if that proves to be true. We cannot let our egos or ideologies keep us from seeing what we need to see and doing what we need to do.

Finally, let me draw your attention to the fact that motion always requires emotion. That means that all of our rationality must flow from and feed into our empathy.

We must have empathy for animals and for ourselves, because we're animals too. Our own animal selves have been squelched in the process of socialization into dominance over non-human animals. Part of the process of freeing the animals thus must be freeing ourselves to be just one animal among many. Because that's what we are.

Our reward for doing that hard work will be an end to the estrangement from nature and other animals that leaves us all feeling so lonely.

Thanks for listening to me this evening. As you move through this exciting weekend, I hope you will think about power, grassroots, and movement. Most importantly, I hope you will always remember that we are not alone.