



Animal advocacy:
The illusion of change

Description

The laws in Canada regarding animal care haven't changed in over a century

By **Georges R. Dupras**

On more than one occasion, I've been asked to list some of the successes that animal advocates have achieved over time. Having over 50 years in the field, there are a number of specific incidences that come to mind, but on this occasion I'll speak more in general terms. My choosing to respond in this manner is because the rationale behind commercial and deep-rooted cultural, institutional or ritual animal practices, have blocked any significant changes in law. In fact, other than a few minor adjustments, the laws in Canada regarding animal care haven't changed in over a century.

Social changes (The un-aimed arrow never misses)

This is not to say that, other than in specific cases, we aren't beginning to advance the objective. One change that is occurring now, as the result of a combination of efforts, is the demise of the old time circus that featured wild animal acts including elephants, lions, bears and tigers jumping through flaming hoops. Certainly pressure by animal rights organizations, and the increasing demands made on our shrinking dollar by an expanding entertainment industry have had an impact. In my opinion the coup de grace for the old Ringling Brothers model occurred because of one man, that being Mr. Guy Laliberté.

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His dream was not to abolish animal circuses but to re-invent a dying art. For years he tried to obtain sufficient funding to start his own circus but was repeatedly turned away by those who felt that acrobatic circuses were of a bygone era.

Mr. Laliberté persisted in following his dream; after all, his circus would have *no wild animals**. He and his partners would rely notably on circus artists, staging, lighting and technology. It took some time but they finally opened their first circus in Montréal – but the old school argued that a circus could not possibly survive without



animals. After all, circuses and lions were synonymous – everyone knew that.

It wasn't long before the name "**Cirque du Soleil**" began to capture the public and media's attention. They have since opened the world's largest and best-known circus training facility in Montréal, have a permanent fixture in Las Vegas and have toured the world. The rest, as they say, is history. This was a significant victory for the welfare of wild animals, perhaps not obtained on purpose but a victory all the same.

My point here is that one man had a dream, one man persisted with developing his dream and, either by design or more likely by circumstance, did what activists in their legions could not accomplish.

The movie **Free Willy** did much the same for whales, dolphins and others destined for years of unnatural confinement in man-made bathtubs.

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The need to re-invent

Rodeos are another entertainment destination that is losing in market share. For them to survive, a serious re-think is in order. By maintaining competitive events, that by no means reflect true western heritage, and where animals are seriously injured or killed, promoters are ignoring changing social values. The Calgary Stampede, often argued for its economic benefits, is heavily subsidized while other venues are experiencing stagnating markets. Short of re-inventing and recognizing changing values, present-day rodeos will suffer the same fate as old time circuses and fade into the mists of time.

The increased importance of a plant-based diet by the Canadian Food Guide is another move forward as well as the recognition of animals as sentient beings in Québec (Bill 54).

The greatest advancement

By far the greatest success story lies in the area of public awareness. This has generated an impressive rise in the number of professionals joining the ranks of animal advocates around the world. A discerning segment of our societies continue to inform themselves of the many nasty little secrets that lie behind locked industry doors.

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The ugly truth (People don't want the truth – they want to be lied too)

Our workforce is so overwhelmed by today's 24/7 expectations; they have become estranged from their own families. They want to be told that all is fine, and in some cases they will even accept what they suspect is misinformation. Others want to remain in the dark because they feel helpless, and knowing the truth is more than they can bear, and still there are those who just don't care.

Nothing to hide but...

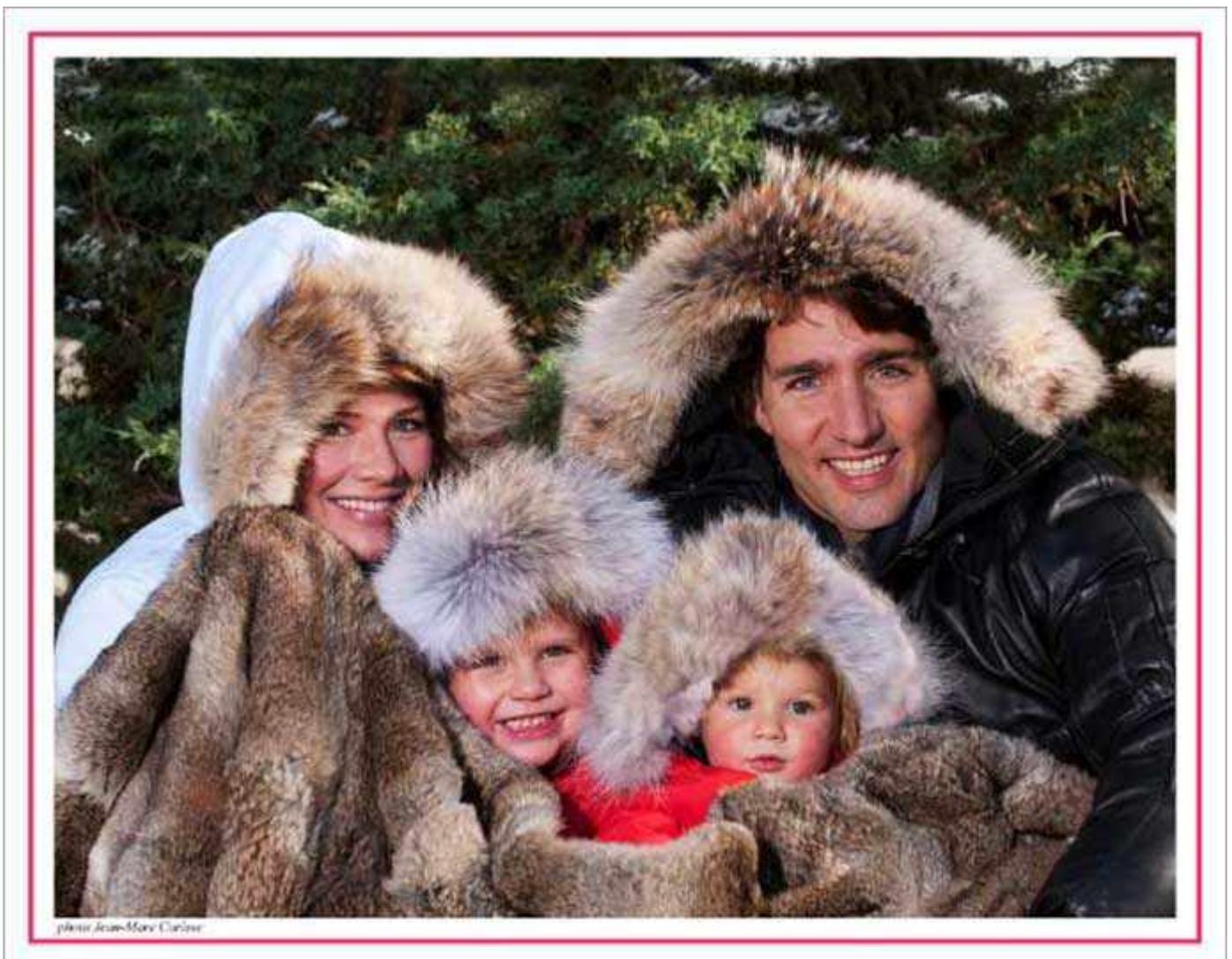
Little will change in this country for animals as long as the **Outdoor Caucus**, a *covert* assembly of elected representatives and others, works to block every effort made to up-date century old animal protection laws. This they have done using the “thin edge of the wedge” argument, even on issues having nothing to do with Canadian interests or values (ex: shark fin importing, dog fighting).

I am not suggesting that they aren't entitled to their opinions, but I am saying that their membership, their views, and the existence of the Outdoor Caucus itself, should be made known to the voting public.

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Talk is cheap (They follow like sheep)

Many politicians in this country are quick to repeat the Prime Minister's tired rhetoric about how we all love animals. This the PM has done while he and his family wear fur from head to toe. There is considerable truth in that old adage, “it isn't what you say that counts, it's what you do”. As to the PM's often-parroted comment that the animal advocate communities should work with industry, I would suggest that M. Trudeau do his homework.





Trudeau family Christmas card 2010 • Photo : The Canadian Press

The Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (CFHS), under the leadership of Neil Jotham, did precisely that during the 60s and 70s. The animal industries were open to change all right, *as long* as the animal lobby did all the changing. This went so far as to have member CFHS humane societies across Canada actually finance, at least in part, the development of a *so-called* humane trap (Vegreville, Alberta). This was done *without the knowledge* of the many Canadians who donated their hard-earned money to member CFHS, SPCAs and Humane Societies.

Have things changed, have we advanced the cause for animals? Are there any real victories? The reality remains that we exploit more animals today than at any time in our history. In Canada, there have been no significant changes in animal care laws in 100 years. The world has lost 60% of its wildlife in the past 50 years. Should we even be asking about successes?

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Animal care is not a game

Each animal saved is a monumental victory in itself. However if century old laws** remain, without significant improvement, and ritual and institutionalized abuse is accepted as necessary for cultural, economic and political reasons, then the only real truth is that we love what animals do *for us*.

The issue of animal care is not a game, it isn't a question of wins or losses; it is a question of *our* development as a species.

* Guy Laliberté, founder of Le Cirque du Soleil, has since sold his majority shares in Le Cirque. No reason to believe the new administrators might change their present no wild animal format.

** Some minor tweaking during the Stephen Harper administration.

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Georges R. Dupras has advocated for animals for over fifty years. A member of the International Association for Bear Research and Management (IBA), a Director of the Animal Alliance of Canada (AAC), Quebec Representative of Zoocheck Canada and past Board member of the Canadian SPCA, he worked on the original Save the Seal campaign in 1966 that culminated in the founding of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) in 1969. ~~Georges Dupras has published two books, *Values in Conflict* and the eBook *Ethics, a Human*~~



Condition, and currently lives in Montreal, Canada.



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1. Animal Welfare
2. Opinion

Tags

1. animal advocacy
2. animal care laws
3. Cirque du Soleil
4. Free Willy
5. Georges R. Dupras
6. Outdoor Caucus

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