



# Amping up Advocacy: How +R and Animal Welfare Go Hand in Paw... and Hoof

By Rachel Brix, CPDT-KA

It took more than four years, but Puppy Doe finally got justice on March 26. That was the day when the human who brutally tortured the pit bull puppy received 8-10 years (out of a possible 60) in prison after being convicted on all 12 felony counts of animal abuse. As positive reinforcement dog trainers, these types of issues and cases such as Puppy Doe’s strike us at our core. We consider ourselves animal lovers, and many of us are involved in various animal advocacy issues that align with our belief that dogs and perhaps even other companion animals should be treated better. So, it follows that we would extend, or at least consider, that all animals deserve to be treated better.

The emaciated pit bull terrier mix was discovered by a pair of friends in a street in Quincy, Massachusetts back on August 31, 2014. She was unable to walk, and they thought she’d maybe been hit by a car. Upon examination, however, veterinarians determined she was the victim of severe, prolonged and even medieval-type abuse. Considering the extent of her injuries and suffering, she was euthanized. Many supporters, including Animal Rescue League President Mary Nee, see this case as setting a new precedent for animal abuse cases, asserting that “Puppy Doe’s short and tragic life was the impetus for stronger laws and protecting all animals.

◀ This bench was placed in memory of Puppy Doe, at the Quincy, Massachusetts, park where she was left for dead in 2015 by the man who had brutally beaten and tortured her. It is part of a documentary film in the works: “Puppy Doe: Free To A Good Home” and printed with permission from their Facebook page, Puppy Doe: A Documentary, [www.puppydoefilm.com](http://www.puppydoefilm.com). Photo by Director of Photography, Brendan Lubin, photographed in Quincy, MA.

In the years it took this case to go to trial, Puppy Doe’s suffering inspired the passage of the PAWS Act in 2014, which doubled fines and increased prison time for abusers in Massachusetts. And PAWS II (a result of the PAWS Act’s task force) passed the Senate on March 15, 2018 and is now in the House Ways and Means Committee. The key provisions of this bill deal with several specific types of abuse and enforcement protocols.

During the sentencing recommendation in the Puppy Doe case, Tracey Cusick, the Massachusetts District Attorney, claimed “this defendant’s conduct is unprecedented. The Commonwealth could find no case of someone having done something similar in this commonwealth, in this nation or anywhere else where somebody has been found guilty of 12 counts of animal cruelty [involving] multiple incidents of abuse on one vulnerable dog.”

Calls for stricter laws for animal abusers have become widespread. Even the FBI has taken notice of the correlation between animal abuse and violence toward humans, and as of January 1, 2016, it declared animal abuse a Class A felony, in the same category as murder, arson and drug trafficking. And recent developments include a push for animal abuse registries (like a sex offender registry), which Tennessee has enacted, and Maryland is poised to be next; municipalities like New York and Tampa have also already jumped on board, as has Cook County (Chicago).

### All Animals Deserve Advocacy

As positive reinforcement dog trainers, our core philosophy is that pain, fear and intimidation don’t work. We continue to learn more about how dogs think, feel and communicate, and believe how we approach training—simply put, the way we treat dogs—means happier dogs and happier dog people. So, given the choice, why not treat all animals the same way? There is no downside to compassion, and there’s no upside to abuse: +R was birthed, at least in part, out of these basic concepts. To then consider becoming vegan — a person who doesn’t consume or use any products that come from an animal — already aligns with our beliefs, since animals as industrial commodities do experience pain, fear and intimidation, and often prolonged suffering and death.

Far from being the norm in dog training, positive reinforcement has existed mainly on the fringe until recently. Its new popularity can largely be attributed to the shift in our cultural collective conscious as our love affair with animals increases. According to American Pet Products Association, pet industry spending for 2016 came in at a record high \$66.75 billion, up from \$60.28 billion in 2015, or a 10.7 percent growth: 6 billion dollars in

growth in one year. Pet industry spending has seen a 185 percent increase since 2001 and was even considered “recession proof” when spending increased despite the economy slump in the late 2000s. We’ve inarguably become a society of “animal lovers.” We’re demonstrating that we care for, spend time with, cater to and love our dogs more than we ever have. Psychology Today reports, “81 percent of those surveyed consider their dogs to be true family members, equal in status to children. It appears that dogs have become such an important part of the family that 54 percent of Americans now consider themselves to be ‘pet parents’ rather than ‘pet owners.’ ”

And parallel to the cultural development of this new badge, the world is undergoing another monumental shift in cultural thinking as humans’ circle of compassion grows to include all animals, not just pets. Just as our clients are becoming increasingly aware of different training methods and asking good questions, we should be asking ourselves good questions as well. Simply put, as animal lovers, it’s becoming increasingly difficult to draw the line between which animals we parent and which animals we eat.

Trends in vegan consumerism are beginning to parallel that of the pet industry. More and more consumers —our clients —are demanding more humane food choices, especially as credible studies continue to emerge about the health benefits of a plant-based diet. For example, people are now more aware of the living conditions of egg-laying hens in battery cages (stacked cages no larger than a piece of typing paper where layers live their entire lives). Consequently, we’ve seen the rise of “humanely raised” and “cage-free” options as people become increasingly reluctant to support such suffering. According to the Washington Post, “nearly 200 U.S. companies—including every major grocery and fast-food chain—that together buy half of the 7 billion eggs laid monthly have pledged to use only cage-free eggs by 2025.”

The term “plant-based” has all but become a household term, and you’d be hard-pressed to watch TV, read a magazine or surf the internet without coming across some mention of “plant-based” or “vegan.” Even the closing ceremonies of the Winter Olympics featured a PSA straight from the athletes themselves on the positive effects of going dairy-free. Due to its increasing popularity, the options for eating a plant-based diet aren’t just restricted to specialty stores, but widely available in retail giants such as Walmart, who also has pledged to only source cage-free eggs by 2025. According to Forbes.com, “sales of plant-based food in the US went up by 8.1 percent during the past year, topping \$3.1 billion, according to research carried out by Nielsen.” Forbes

goes on to declare “plant-based dairy alternatives are expected to represent 40 percent of the combined total of dairy and dairy alternative beverages within three years, up from just 25 percent in 2016.” As a result, many large and established, yet forward-thinking animal product-based companies are partnering with vegan brands.

Because of social media and the internet, keeping the public informed about where their food comes from is easier—and more graphic—than ever. “Factory farms,” or concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), are not easy to define, and if you are brave enough to Google it for more than a blink you’ll see why: there is no way to explain the inhumane confinement and treatment of the animals, or the inherently violent jobs of the human workers. The popular website One Green Planet reports that “a 2012 nationwide [study] commissioned by the [ASPCA] showed that 71 percent of Americans support undercover investigative efforts by animal welfare organizations to expose animal abuse on industrial [factory] farms, and 64 percent oppose making such efforts illegal.” If factory farm meat giants or dairy behemoths could be put on trial as Puppy Doe’s abuser was, the testimony would be similarly appalling and disturbing even though the victims are pigs, cows and chickens. The only difference is our perception, and our perception is changing.

Just as animal food products are on the decline, expect the number of trainers not committed to +R to fade as well. According to an article by expert trainer Karen B. London, Ph.D., CAAB, CPDT in Bark magazine, “The change from coercion training to positive reinforcement is not new, but what is new is that now, most positive trainers have always trained that way. Fewer people are learning coercive techniques in the first place and therefore, there are fewer trainers to cross over.” And with an influx of trainers entering the profession, we can expect an increased number of comrades. According to the US Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor and Statistics, “Overall employment of animal care and service workers is projected to grow 22 percent from 2016 to 2026, much faster than the average for all occupations” and animal trainers are expected to increase 11 percent.

And we’re not just talking about food. Consumers—again, our clients—are demanding more compassionate and sustainable

choices not only when they grocery shop or eat out, but also for what they wear and how they are entertained. As an example, luxury brands that have gone fur-free include Stella McCartney, Michael Kors, Gucci, and Versace, among several others. Moreover, growing concerns about animal testing has generated an abundance of cruelty-free make-ups, toiletries and household products. Cruelty-free labeling and logos like the Leaping Bunny have made it easier for progressively aware and concerned consumers to align their purchases with their convictions.

As more and more clients/consumers become aware of the difference between +R and other dog training methods— and

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that +R is backed by science— we should expect and welcome more questions about our methods. Since +R is becoming increasingly popular, non-positive reinforcement trainers are increasingly using the term “balanced” training, meaning a blend of something on the spectrum of an Alpha Dog approach with +R. While dog trainers continue to define and label their training philosophies, these private and public discussions are bringing more awareness to the force-free movement. So, expect more clients to be looking for “cruelty-free” dog trainer “labels” as we become more evolved and concerned in our relationships with all animals.

Comparatively, as the force-free dog training movement continues to gain momentum, the animal rights movement has seen an explosion of growth as well. While the number of vegans in each country remains small (for example, Israel boasts the most vegans at 5 percent of its population), a continued sharp rise is expected. Numerous studies and polls have found the number of vegans in the US has doubled in the past three years, and the number of vegans in the UK is up a staggering 700 percent in two years according to Plant Based Magazine, bringing the number to 3.5 billion.

While animal-related mainstream feel-good films continue to churn out of Hollywood, we've also seen a multitude of well-researched documentaries released to wide audience acclaim that explore our relationship with animals and animal products. Movies such as "Cowspiracy," "What the Health?," "Vegucated" and "Forks Over Knives" are increasing in popularity as people see the correlation between animal welfare, personal health and the environment.

Consequently, many of these exposés have led to serious problems for those who exploit animals, such as the 2013 film "Blackfish." Its eye-opening reveal of the life of Tilikum, the killer whale, and her deplorable existence at SeaWorld has been subsequently, unmistakably and still largely responsible for the aquarium giant's sharp decline in ticket sales. According to Time.com, Seaworld Entertainment "faced an 84 percent drop in income...in the wake of the damning documentary 'Blackfish.'" In addition to informative films, the US—and the world—has seen an increase in animal welfare-related legislation, and the campaigns are similarly revealing. Many of these bills advocate the same fundamental principles as positive reinforcement training.

Now we might not necessarily consider +R "advocacy." But every time we train using science-based force-free training methods, we eliminate fear, intimidation and even physical punishment and are thereby advocating for improved dog welfare. So, it's not much of a stretch to say we would feel force-free methods advisable in training any animal. Case in point, the power of animal welfare legislation is evidenced in Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus retiring all its performing elephants. This decision arose from increased customer concern during the past several years about abusive training methods that center around the use of the bull hook and shackling elephants nearly 24 hours a day except when forcing them to perform. As of 2018, 50 countries have full or partial circus bans, including the US, where jurisdictions in 29 states have bans, directly reflecting public sentiment against the training methods of circus elephants.

To sum up, people all over the world, including our clients and colleagues, are embracing all-animal welfare. Already being a part of the force-free movement, it's only logical for us to consider extending humane treatment to all animals. At the very least we need to be aware, as we can expect our clients' awareness to continue to expand and grow. Positive reinforcement trainer Casey McGee, CPDT-KA, acknowledges, "Many of my dog trainer colleagues are vegan, vegetarian, or something in-between because

being inspired to lessen the suffering of dogs dovetails with being inspired to lessen the suffering of all animals."

This doesn't mean we enter our classrooms waving an animal rights banner over our heads. Being a vegan dog trainer doesn't mean you make your beliefs center stage in your classes and push your views on your clients. It may mean you advocate for all animals in a way that makes sense for you; and those ethics and choices will translate into your career and positively impact your compassion in dog training, your compassion with other animals and your compassion and empathy with people—and your outlook on the how we all relate to one another. Even Forbes.com contributor Katrina Fox recommends, "If you're about to start a business, it's worth making your products vegan-friendly from the start. If you already have a business, consider veganizing it by removing any animal-based ingredients or components." Who better to veganize their approach to their work and life than those whose work and life already involves treating animals with the utmost compassion?



**Rachel Brix, CPDT-KA**, is a veteran high school teacher who, inspired by her dog Percy, resigned to pursue a full-time career with dogs. Along with being a positive reinforcement trainer, Rachel is a long-time vegetarian who went vegan for Veganuary in 2015 and hasn't looked back. She is very involved in diverse animal advocacy efforts. In addition to working on the campaign for what eventually became Missouri's Canine

Cruelty Prevention Act and various other dog-related initiatives in the region, she pioneered the first and only city-wide wild animal circus ban in Arkansas that passed in 2015. Rachel also spearheaded the committee that built Carroll County, Arkansas's first and only dog park in 2014.

Rachel is also a writer and a speaker, having been published in several issues of the APDT's *Chronicle of the Dog*, one of her articles being nominated for a 2017 Dog Writers Association of America Maximillian medal. Rachel has given numerous speeches to communities, committees and local governments advocating for improved animal welfare. She also presented a *Short* at the Annual APDT Conference in 2017 and a seminar at TriDEx this spring. Along with her membership in APDT, Rachel is also a PPG member and Canine Good Citizen Evaluator and provides consulting, private lessons and group training classes. She and her husband live in northwest Arkansas with their five rescue animals.