



# Cesar Chavez and Animal Rights

by Dan Brook

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Cesar Chavez with companion dogs, Huelga (l) and Boycott. (c. 1975)

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Cesar Chavez (March 31, 1927 - April 23, 1993) was a great organizer and leader and a powerful advocate for farm workers, people of color, and other poor people ("We are engaged in a struggle for the freedom and dignity which poverty denies us"), as well as for unions (especially the United Farm Workers, which he co-founded with Dolores Huerta, who once quipped that half the leadership was vegetarian), unity, civil rights, environmentalism (indeed, his last public remarks were against toxic chemicals), and non-violence ("Nonviolence is the only way to peace and justice"). Less known though no less important, he was also passionate about animal rights and vegetarianism ("I feel very deeply about vegetarianism and the animal kingdom").

Indeed, Cesar Chavez recognized that all oppressions are connected and intertwined and he saw these and other social issues and struggles as being intimately related to each other, all of which are necessary for achieving



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comprehensive rights and complete liberation. Yet, Cesar Chavez' beliefs in animal rights and his vegetarianism are less-commonly known than his other beliefs and practices, too often excluded from his biographies and celebrations. Although he didn't focus on the major health and environmental benefits of vegetarianism, Cesar Chavez did discuss poisonous pesticides and viewed animal rights as an integral component in the struggle for universal justice.

In the interest of balance, here is Cesar Chavez, in his own words, on the issues of animal rights, vegetarianism, and their connections to other struggles: "I became a vegetarian after realizing that animals feel afraid, cold, hungry and unhappy like we do. I feel very deeply about vegetarianism and the animal kingdom. It was my dog Boycott who led me to question the right of humans to eat other sentient beings."

"Kindness and compassion towards all living beings is a mark of a civilized society. Racism, economic deprivation, dog fighting and cock fighting, bullfighting and rodeos are all cut from the same defective fabric: violence. Only when we have become nonviolent towards all life will we have learned to live well ourselves." (in a message to Eric Mills of the Action for Animals).

"We need, in a special way, to work twice as hard to help people understand that the animals are fellow creatures, that we must protect them and love them as we love ourselves...We know we cannot be kind to animals until we stop exploiting them, exploiting animals in the name of science, exploiting animals in the name of sport, exploiting animals in the name of fashion, and yes, exploiting animals in the name of food." (upon acceptance of a Lifetime Achievement Award in 1992 from In Defense of Animals)

If we truly want to honor the inspirational life of Cesar Chavez, we need to carry on his vital work by continuing to make the linkages amongst various social problems while being active in the struggles to solve them. ¡Sí, se puede!

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