

# ANIMAL SEXUAL ABUSE FACT SHEET

## WHAT IS ANIMAL SEXUAL ABUSE?

Animal sexual abuse, often referred to as bestiality\*, is the sexual molestation of an animal by a human. This kind of animal abuse includes a wide range of behaviors such as vaginal, anal, or oral penetration; fondling; oral-genital contact; penetration using an object; and killing or injuring an animal for sexual gratification. Animal sexual abuse may or may not include physical violence other than the sexual violation; and may or may not result in physical injury to the animal. Animal sexual abuse, like rape, is the eroticization of violence, control, and exploitation.

## IS ANIMAL SEXUAL ABUSE A PROBLEM TODAY?

Yes, although we don't have statistics to tell us how many animals currently are being sexually abused. This problem is difficult to quantify because most of the abuse occurs in secret and the victims can never tell. Studies of the rate of human attempts to have forced sex with animals have variously estimated that the percentage of males who sexually abuse animals is between 1 and 65 % (Adams, 1995). Kinsey & Pomeroy's 1948 study of male sexual behavior found that 8% of the total U.S. male population admitted to having had sexual contact with animals.

Evidence that sexual abuse of animals still occurs is readily available. Almost any internet search engine will lead you to very graphic and disturbing material describing and promoting the sexual abuse of animals. Photographs of this abuse are easily accessed by anyone on the internet, even children. And for every photograph shown on the internet, a real animal was abused. Detailed how-to guides for the sexual abuse of animals involving a variety of species can be found on the internet, along with information on laws, animal-transmitted diseases, personal advertisements, "pro-zoophile" resources, and even a model letter for an animal abuser to use to "come-out" to his/her friends and relatives. Many web sites provide links to numerous different pornographic sites that include the sexual abuse of animals. One site provided almost 200 links, and this site alone reports receiving approximately 46,000 visits per day. Investigating and reporting these internet activities has proven difficult—sites are often moved and renamed, and identities are kept secret. Many "zoophiles" or "zoosexuals," as they refer to themselves, spend hours communicating with other abusers in internet chat rooms where animal sexual abuse is accepted or even promoted, advice is given, and detailed descriptions of abusive activities are shared.

## IS IT REALLY ANIMAL ABUSE?

Yes. Sexual molestation of animals by humans may physically injure or kill the animal victim. Cases of dogs with severe rectal tearing from anal sexual contact; cats killed by penetration by a human male; chickens decapitated to increase the abuser's sexual pleasure; animals beaten stabbed, or mutilated during or after sexual contact; and animals crushed for sexual gratification have been reported. Many animals are physically restrained during the abuse. Not all cases of animal sexual abuse will involve physical injury to the animal, but all sexual molestation of an animal by a human is abuse.

In his 1993 article, Dr. Frank Ascione stated that "bestiality may be considered cruel even in cases when physical harm to an animal does not occur (this is similar to the case of adult sexual activity with a child where consent is presumed to be impossible)." This is because animals are unable to be fully informed, communicate consent, or to speak out about their abuse. In a 1997 article, Piers Beirne, Professor of Criminology at the University of Southern Maine, points out that "for genuine consent to sexual relations to be present...both participants must be conscious, fully informed and positive in their desires. Bestiality is by nature sexual coercion because animals are incapable of genuinely saying 'yes' or 'no' to humans in forms we can readily understand." In human-animal relationships, the human has power and control over the animal, often in all aspects of the animal's care and well-being. Thus, a sexual "relationship" between human and animal cannot be considered consensual.

\*Animal sexual abuse may also be referred to as zoophilia, bestiality, zooerasty, or sodomy.

## **ISN'T ALL THIS ATTENTION ON ANIMAL ABUSE AN INTRUSION ON AN INDIVIDUAL'S PRIVATE SEXUAL CHOICES?**

No. Unlike sexual interactions between consenting adult humans, animal sexual abuse is not simply about an individual's private sexual choice. As in the case of child sexual abuse and adult rape, animal sexual abuse is an activity in which one party has no choice and cannot consent or refuse. When he/she initiates a sexual activity in which the other partner has no choices and must participate, the sexual abuser of animals leaves the realm of private action.

## **WHO SEXUALLY ABUSES ANIMALS?**

Although there has been little research to date on animal sexual abuse and its perpetrators, case reports and anecdotal accounts indicate that men are the primary abusers, although women and children may be forced or coerced into sexual acts with animals or may be abusers themselves. Reports indicate a wide age range of abusers. Abusers may feel isolated, insecure, and powerless. They may have difficulty in forming healthy interpersonal relationships with other adult humans and may have experienced neglect, physical abuse or sexual abuse as a child. Some may suffer from mental illness. In a study published in the *International Journal of Psychosomatics* (Alvarez & Freinhar, 1991), psychiatric patients exhibited a significantly higher prevalence rate (55%) of bestiality than control groups of medical inpatients (10%) and psychiatric staff members (15%).

## **WHY DO PEOPLE SEXUALLY ABUSE ANIMALS?**

People sexually abuse animals for a variety of reasons. Many abusers fall into one or more of the categories below (adapted from Carol Adams, 1995):

1. Opportunistic/Experimental: This type of abuse is often viewed as the act of a curious youth or a lonely man. These individuals may seek out animals for sexual gratification because animals are accessible, vulnerable, and non-threatening. They may abuse an animal out of boredom, insecurity, curiosity or as a substitute for a human partner. This type of abuser becomes accustomed to the idea that it is acceptable to exploit and control others for his/her own sexual gratification.

2. Fixated/Primary: In this category of animal sexual abuse, animals are the primary or exclusive focus of a human's sexual desires. These abusers often refer to themselves as "zoophiles." Some individuals may have species or gender preferences and use pornography involving animals. They defend their sexual abuse of animals as "consensual," claiming it benefits their "partners," and characterize their behavior as "loving." The rationalizations used to justify their actions are the same as those used by pedophiles, and, as in the case of victims of pedophiles, the claimed motivations don't matter to the victims. Just as pedophiles may seek out employment in child-related fields, this type of animal sexual abuser may seek out employment in animal-related fields in order to have access to numerous potential victims.

3. Domineering/Sadistic: Batterers, rapists and pornographers may force women, children, and other vulnerable individuals to have sex with animals in order to humiliate, dominate, control, and exploit the human and animal victims. Children who have been sexually abused may act out their abuse on animals in an attempt to gain a sense of control. Some people may derive sexual gratification from the pain and suffering inflicted while sexually abusing animals. This type of sadistic sexual abuser will probably injure or kill the animal.

Any type of animal sexual abuse can involve the use of force and physical violence and may result in the intentional or unintentional death of the animal.

## **WHAT ANIMALS ARE VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE?**

Cases of sexual abuse of animals include many species, both domestic and wild. Dogs and horses are the most frequently mentioned targets. Their availability and status as companions may make them likely victims. Dogs may be acquired from free-to-good home advertisements, pet shops, breeders, animal shelters or as strays. Animals who are kept outside, such as dogs, horses, cows, sheep, chickens, may be abused by "fence-jumpers" who trespass to gain access to animal victims. Wildlife in captivity, such as those in roadside zoos, may also be vulnerable to abusers.

## **IS THERE A CONNECTION BETWEEN ANIMAL SEXUAL ABUSE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, CHILD ABUSE AND OTHER VIOLENT CRIMES?**

The sexual abuse of animals is often linked to the sexual abuse of women and children (Kowal, 1998). This form of domestic violence involves the use of animals for degradation and sexual exploitation of the battered partner. According to Lenore Walker (1979), bestiality may be a part of further tormenting and humiliating the victim. In Walker's (1984) interviews with battered women, bestiality was mentioned as one of the "unusual sex acts" desired by their partners. In a test group made up of women who had past relationships with battering and nonbattering partners, it was found that this experience occurred with 41% of the battering partners and 5% of the non-battering partners. Child sexual abusers may also sexually abuse animals to enhance, expand or extend the abuse of the genuinely powerless and unsuspecting victim (Adams, 1994). Some case studies of sexual abuse of children include reports of forcing children to interact sexually with animals (Ascione, 1993). A child's sexual abuse of an animal may be a warning sign that the child is a victim or witness of physical, sexual or emotional abuse.

Research also indicates a connection between animal sexual abuse and other types of violent crimes. According to a 1986 study, forty percent of the perpetrators of sexually motivated homicides who had been sexually abused as children also reported that they had sexually abused animals (Ressler, et al. 1986).

## **IS ANIMAL SEXUAL ABUSE ILLEGAL?**

Vermont has no law *specifically* outlawing this activity, however a recent case in Franklin County was successfully prosecuted under the animal cruelty statute.

## **WHY DON'T ALL STATES HAVE LAWS AGAINST ANIMAL SEXUAL ABUSE?**

Many of the laws that prohibit sexual activities between consenting adults have been repealed by state legislatures because the laws seemed to be no longer relevant to society. Additionally, courts have ruled invalid broad laws covering some sexual practices. These attempts to modernize current societal attitudes in our laws have inadvertently caused animal sexual abuse to be legalized.

## **WHAT DO MOST OF THE CURRENT LAWS AGAINST ANIMAL SEXUAL ABUSE INCLUDE?**

In general, state bestiality laws prohibit a person from intentionally engaging in any sexual act, penetration or intercourse with the genitalia of an animal.

## **WHAT TYPES OF PENALTIES EXIST FOR ANIMAL SEXUAL ABUSE?**

Sex with an animal is a felony in five states and a misdemeanor in nineteen. Maximum penalties go as high as a \$50,000 in Montana; Massachusetts and Rhode Island may imprison offenders for up to 20 years.

## **WHAT SHOULD AN ANIMAL SEXUAL ABUSE LAW COVER?**

These laws should be comprehensive enough to protect *all* animals. In addition to prohibiting sexual acts with animals, these laws should also prohibit 1) coercing anyone to have sex with animals; 2) entering into sexual acts with animals in front of a child; 3) using an object to sexually abuse an animal; 4) videotaping sexual animal abuse; and 5) killing or violently abusing animals for sexual gratification. As part of the sentencing the courts should have the option of requiring the convicted abuser to not reside in a home where animals also reside, not to work or volunteer his or her services in a facility where animals are kept, and to undergo a psychological evaluation and counseling at the abuser's expense. This language should be in addition to any existing anti-cruelty statutory language.

## **WON'T A LAW PROHIBITING THIS ACTIVITY BE ANOTHER CASE OF LEGISLATING AN INDIVIDUAL'S PERSONAL LIFE?**

No—this behavior is animal abuse and therefore must be addressed by the law. Furthermore, this activity is not merely "personal" any more than the sexual abuse of children or the rape of adults is merely personal sexual activities.

## **DON'T STATE ANTICRUELTY STATUTES ALREADY COVER THIS MISTREATMENT?**

In some instances, state law could be applied when animal sexual abuse occurs. However, many statutes contain wording that would only cover sexual abuse if the animal is killed or severely injured making a case of animal abuse difficult to prove. Also, in most states certain animals (such as farm animals, wild animals, animals in laboratories, animals in USDA licensed facilities, or animals belonging to the abuser) are not covered by the anti-cruelty law and therefore would not be covered. And in other states, the cruelty statute only applies to mistreatment of someone else's animals but doesn't protect animals from the person who owns them. Especially in this type of case, the owner of the animal is often the abuser.

## **SHOULD A PROHIBITION ON ANIMAL SEXUAL ABUSE BE INCLUDED IN A LAW THAT ADDRESSES OTHER HUMAN SEXUAL ACTS?**

Not if that law addresses activities not involving animals. Such a law could easily be overturned by the courts as a result of changing attitudes about the other sexual activities covered by the law—without specifically intending to, the court would thereby make sexual molestation of animals legal. As of January 1999, eight states (California, Delaware, Georgia, North Dakota, Utah, and Wisconsin) have laws that address sexual abuse of animals exclusively. Another sixteen states laws lump animal sexual abuse with such activities as having sex with a dead human being or with a minor child. The HSUS suggests that prohibiting language be placed immediately after a state anticruelty statute.

## **WHY HAS THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES DEVELOPED THIS CAMPAIGN?**

Animal cruelty is the focus of The Humane Society of the United States' (HSUS) First Strike® Campaign. Animal sexual abuse is a rarely discussed and often overlooked form of animal cruelty. The HSUS, through the First Strike® Campaign, addresses the connection between animal cruelty and human violence by promoting strong legislation dealing with animal cruelty, providing information and resources to communities to develop coordinated responses to violence, educating the public and professionals dealing with violence issues about the animal cruelty/human violence connection, and encouraging the public and relevant professionals to treat animal cruelty as a serious crime and a predictor or indicator of other criminal activity. The HSUS is committed to ending all forms of animal cruelty, including the sexual abuse of animals.

The HSUS believes that individuals who sexually abuse animals should be held accountable for their actions. Although some abusers may seek help on their own, most will not. The criminal justice system offers an opportunity to intervene in the life of the abuser and to protect future animal victims, as well as possible human victims. In addition to jail time, fines, probation, or other penalties, those convicted of animal sexual abuse should receive a thorough psychological evaluation, and counseling, if appropriate. The HSUS has initiated this campaign in order to educate the public and legislators about the serious nature of animal sexual abuse.

## **WHAT IS THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES DOING ABOUT THIS PROBLEM?**

As part of its First Strike® Campaign against animal abuse and human violence, The HSUS is launching an effort to enact laws prohibiting animal sexual abuse in the states that don't have such laws. We are also urging those states that do have laws against animal sexual abuse to strengthen them. The HSUS is also working to educate the public and professionals in law enforcement, animal shelters, and the mental health field about the serious nature of animal sexual abuse and what they can do to stop it.

## **WHAT CAN I DO?**

You can work with your state legislators to enact or strengthen animal sexual abuse laws. If you would like more information on how to go about this, contact The HSUS's government affairs staff. You can also contact the servers of web sites that provide space for animal sexual abuse information and tell them that the material is offensive. Tell these servers that at the very least they should keep animal sexual abuse sites out of the reach of children. Many servers do not want to be associated with this kind of material, and some will remove it. Finally, you spread the word about animal sexual abuse—help The HSUS to educate everyone so that together we can protect animals from abusers.