

Absolutely No-Kill: Maintaining a Vegan Sanctuary

By Stan Petrey

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A philosophical debate is raging in the animal rescue community as groups seek to come to terms with the concept of "no-kill" shelters. Questions usually focus only on the fate of the homeless cats and dogs; what is often absent from the discussion are the numbers of murdered "farm" animals fed to shelter animals. Perhaps the definition of "no-kill" varies according to which species are considered companions. The issue for the Home At Last sanctuary in Salvisa, Kentucky, is whether a vegan animal rescue sanctuary can succeed in a primarily agrarian culture, and within a larger society that values dogs and cats as companions but views many others in the animal kingdom as a food source.

Home At Last Animal Sanctuary is a work in progress. In addition to being a companion- and large-animal rescue and lifetime care facility, it also includes 150 acres of woodlands set aside for rehabilitated wildlife release and protection. This rescue of one species at the expense of another contradicts our definition of "sanctuary." Using cruelty-free food is at the heart of Home At Last's mission, a challenging but not impossible task.

Implementing such a serious program requires careful study. James Peden, author of "Vegetarian Cats & Dogs," provides reliable scientific information and consults with us on specific issues. Since 1985, after years of painstaking research, Peden has guided thousands in search of safe vegan alternatives for dogs and cats.

Home At Last was organized nearly two years ago by four people, including myself, with many years of experience in companion animal rescue and animal rights activism. We understood that vegan feeding was a medically safe alternative and founded Home At Last's policies accordingly. The sanctuary, home to 70-80 domestic animals at any given time and hundreds of protected wild ones, became operational in June 1997.

The dogs were given vegetarian food from the beginning, but it has taken (and continues to take) more time to achieve vegan status for the cats, especially the 20 in off-site foster care. Of course, the courage of our convictions has been tested periodically, as when we refused the donation of thousands of pounds of meat-based dog food during a frantic search for a new supplier.

The implementation of a vegan diet for the various Home At Last residents has varied according to species. The dogs adapted quickly and willingly to vegetarianism. We began with a canned food and switched to a premium dry food after a few months. The current kibble du jour is Natural Life Vegetarian (a vegan food). In the first few months, diets of new canine arrivals were changed gradually, allowing a week or longer for adjustment. We have found this step (thankfully) to be unnecessary; the first meal of all newly rescued dogs is now vegan.

Some dogs receive a combination of kibble and homemade food (texturized vegetable protein, oats, oil and Vegedog, a supplement formulated to meet the nutritional requirements of dogs and puppies). The majority, however, eat the commercial food exclusively. Puppies are fed a mix of kibble and homemade food with slightly higher fat content and a supplement to insure full development.

The dogs display every sign of good health. They are energetic, yet emotionally balanced. Cool heads are important because our dogs live in quasi-natural environments, with small packs in huge enclosures. Some dramatic health improvements may be attributed to the diet. Casey, a dog whose weakened immune system allowed demodectic mange to cover his entire body, now has a

beautiful thick coat after 16 months of vegetarianism (and treatment). Maggie, whose allergies kept her itchy and prone to hot spots, finally has a luxurious coat. Fleas didn't appear until fall, and many dogs have remained flea-free without treatment.

The primary challenge in feeding the dogs is cost. The available openings are based more on food and veterinary expenses than on physical space. There are more than 40 dogs currently on the Home At Last vegan diet. If donated meat-based food (fairly easy to acquire) were accepted, we could manage a few more at this time.

The changeover process for cats involves mixing a meat kibble and canned food with a homemade recipe. After several days of this, the evening meal is changed to a vegan combination of texturized vegetable protein, Vegecat supplement, squash, sweet potatoes, nutritional yeast, oil and vegetable broth. Using the supplement is not optional; as Peden explains, "Cats cannot convert beta-carotene from plants to vitamin A, as most other mammals, since they are unable to convert it to retinol. Cats must be provided with a preformed source of vitamin A." Vegecat supplement contains performed vitamin A, arachidonic acid, vitamin B-12, taurine, and other essential nutrients. Peden developed it to "break the sordid link to slaughterhouses, but the health benefits never seem to cease. Many cases of 'unknown diseases' clear up with the Vegecat diet."

A difficult three-week period of cat rebellion among the permanent residents followed the first month's changeover. It could have been an easy place to give up, but copious treat offerings won the cats over. Peden warns against inflexibility: "If your cat refuses to eat over a day, don't make it a battle of wills because (he) may end up losing interest in any food." The importance of observation cannot be overstated. Rapid weight loss can lead to fatty liver syndrome (hepatic lipidosis), a life-threatening condition. Putting vegetarian food out for the cats and walking away is not acceptable.

Although a few cats still refuse to eat vegan exclusively, almost all are happy now and love the homemade vegan kibble. The process is labor intensive, though. A recipe capable of feeding 10 cats once a day for five days takes at least two hours to make and involves difficult chopping and double baking.

One of our cats, McBane, required surgery for bowel obstruction and experienced frequent stomach upsets before becoming vegetarian. McBane's dramatically improved bowel and urinary function since the change is encouraging; after one year on plant food, he's never appeared healthier or happier. In fact, no diet-related problems have appeared in any of the cats, whose vegetarian status ranges from one year to four months.

Feeding the dozen or so pigs, goats, rabbits and cows requires only careful label inspection of commercial food. The pigs love fruit treats, which help keep them in condition (very important for 900-pound Gilbert, who was hit by a truck before coming here). There is also no predicament regarding post-adoption diets; we don't re-home these animals, even the pot-bellies.

Our nutritional policy was presented nearly a year ago in a newsletter editorial explaining the aforementioned refusal of tons of free meat-based dog food: "Although saying yes to the offer of a portion of 43,000 pounds of dog food would have solved our feeding problems for quite a while, it was time to pay the cost of remaining ethical. We simply could not renounce our position as an absolutely no-kill shelter by betraying all those other animals whose lives are sacrificed in part to feed dogs and cats. How could we face our rescued pigs if we fed their kind to their buddies in the adjoining yards?" Some of our members didn't agree with this decision. A few others felt we were proselytizing. It was, instead, a simple statement of our resolve. Interestingly, the donation response to that newsletter was exceptional.

As we move deeper into this project, skeptical questions can be answered with greater confidence. Doubters claim that our idealism is unfairly making dietary slaves of the animals. "This isn't their natural food" is an often-used retort. But is a bag of "rendered surprise" the natural diet of a dog or cat? Activist Dick Gregory said, "When you suggest to some folks that they ought to try putting

their cats and dogs on a meatless diet, they respond as though their little pets had never been domesticated! They will say, 'Dogs and cats are supposed to eat meat. They're descended from tigers and wolves!' Of course, if there was any real practicing line of descent, the chances are the pets would have already consumed their owners and their kids!"

We've even been admonished by friends in animal welfare to keep our vegetarianism secret. Ironically, there is something threatening about vegetarianism, especially to those "animal lovers" whose primary interests are dogs and cats. To insure continued support from our dog and cat fan contributor base, we do not hide our philosophy but have learned when to stand down from the soap box. And while some of our members/volunteers may not agree with our methods, they are generally cooperative and supportive.
