

BOOK AND VIDEO REVIEWS

The Young Person's Action Guide to Animal Rights

Barbara James (1992). Virago: London. 144pp. Paperback. Obtainable from John Waters, Random Century House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, UK. (ISBN 1853814695) Price £3.99 post free.

I approached undertaking a review of this book with some scepticism. The title alone filled me with apprehension. Was this yet another in a series of books groaning under the weight of ethics, moral righteousness and the view that there can only be one possible answer to this complex subject? By the time I had read the first few pages I relaxed and with a sigh of relief started to enjoy reading the book. At last, here was a balanced, readable book full of sound advice and absolutely in tune with the level of reader targeted.

This book is a sensible, fair, questioning, no-nonsense approach to an emotive subject. The author respects the fact that young people quite rightly feel very strongly about such issues. It would have been all too easy to play on their emotions but instead it treats them as thinking individuals with a viewpoint that should and must be heard. It successfully offers guidance on how these feelings can be channelled constructively into effective actions.

Advice on how the reader can make a contribution to an issue or issues they have strong convictions about is varied and always practical. Throughout it is stressed that whereas it may not be possible to change things overnight, or launch a one-man crusade, much can be done on an individual basis by, for example, making often quite small changes to one's life-style, talking to friends, relatives and people in authority, writing to relevant organizations etc, about one's views and concerns. How to use the powerful tool of public opinion and consumer pressure by effective discussion and persuasion without resorting to extremist views and actions is explored.

At no time is the reader pressurized into feeling they must make dramatic changes to their life to achieve results. For example, the option of whether or not to become a vegetarian is raised under several topics especially those concerned with modern day practices in food production. Several options are put forward: become a vegetarian; make a decision to cut down on the amount of meat eaten by perhaps substituting a vegetarian meal once a week; if you still prefer to eat meat buy organic or free-range meat.

The reader is urged to research the subject of their concern thoroughly, to stand by the beliefs they feel at the time, to take responsibility for their own actions and not be over influenced by what other people think and do.

At the start of the book it is suggested that the reader answers a number of questions (20 in all) based on a wide range of animal welfare issues and then having read the book go back and answer them again. I hope the aim of this is to show that there is no easy, instant and reassuring answer to any questions posed. No answer is completely right. The decision we make is a complex one - a moral dilemma based on the individual and the circumstances at the time. Quite rightly, one should always be left with a lingering doubt about whether the right decision had been made and could we and should we do more.

Some eighty-seven topics are discussed relating to the involvement of animals in such areas as entertainment, hunting, sport, fashion and beauty, research, food production, companion and working animals, conservation and the environment. Other issues such as cultural differences to animal welfare are also looked at.

Each is dealt with in alphabetical order providing relevant factual information about the subject, the main arguments for and against followed by a section entitled 'what can you do'. I found a number of very interesting facts new to me. For instance, I had not appreciated that although the popularity of bullfighting in Spain seems to be growing, especially amongst young Spaniards (although it is officially banned in one town) it is still heavily supported by tourism.

A comprehensive directory is provided of 174 contact organizations and official bodies (eg European Parliament) largely in the UK and continental Europe but also covering North America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Suggestions for further reading (70 titles grouped under subject headings) and audio-visual material is also given.

I found this an excellent book, both from the material it contains and the style it is written in making it very readable and easy to use. I hope very much that anyone who has dealings with young people will consider making it available to them.

M S Wilson

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Management Guidelines for Bears and Racoons

Edited by John Partridge (1992). Association of British Wild Animal Keepers: Bristol. 174pp. Paperback. Obtainable from the publishers, ABWAK, 12 Tackley Road, Eastville, Bristol BS5 6UQ, UK or in North America from Ralph C Curtis Books, PO Box 349, Fanibel Island, Florida 33957, USA (ISBN 0 9505116 84) Price £9.95 including postage in the UK; add £1.25 for postage in Europe and £3.25 elsewhere.

As the editor points out bears have a quite long captive history, but have been poorly treated during most of that time because they were mostly kept in bare and concrete pits. Such an environment frustrates their highly explorative nature and does not consider their manipulative abilities, both pre-requisites for the omnivorous life-style of most of the bears and racoons.

The book provides a lot of ideas and advice which should be considered when planning new enclosures and for improvement of existing enclosures to better meet the behavioural and dietary demands of bears, pandas and racoons. The latter aspect is very important because most of the zoos will have to deal for quite a long time with their current facilities.

Ideas and advice are provided in two ways:

1. Indirectly by presenting the current knowledge about evolution and biology of bears and racoons in general and for each species. From these chapters ideas for managing the animals can be derived. The information given ranges from taxonomic status and