Animal Activism: Out of Control

THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY HAS RESPONDED TO SEVERAL IMPORTANT SCIENCE POLICY issues this year and is getting a little public traction on some, including stem cell research policies and global climate change. We have mostly ignored another, however, and it’s a big one. Scientific progress depends on experiment, and in the life sciences that usually entails the use of live animals. But in many countries, animal rights organizations have successfully used extreme tactics to intimidate scientists and their institutions.

Scientists in the United Kingdom have been engaged in this struggle longer than those in the United States, and they appear to have been vigilant enough to secure at least some moderation of the problem. In the United States, however, if you conduct experiments on primate nervous systems, you might have the following experience. Photographs, allegedly of your subjects wearing expressions of extreme pain, are circulated to media outlets. Crowds with bullhorns picket your residence, and leaflets declaring that you commit “atrocities” are distributed to your neighbors. Your colleague who works on monkey behavior is the target of a firebomb. It is mistakenly placed on a neighbor’s porch; the good news is that the fuse timer failed, but the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) says the blast might well have killed those inside.

Am I making this up? Well, it happened to Dr. Dario Ringach, a member of the neurobiology faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The work he did on higher-order information processing in visual systems had been published in good journals, including this one. The dénouement of the assault he weathered for 4 years is described in a triumphal press release from the Animal Liberation Front (ALF): “You Win” it said, quoting Ringach. The subhead read, “UCLA Vivisector Dario Ringach Quits Animal Experimentation.” The release boasts about the reason for this outcome: He “asked that his family be left alone,” it says. Well, in the absence of timely help from his institution, he made the best decision he could, as you or I probably would have. Meanwhile, the ALF has taken credit for both this victory and the firebombing.

During the long spell of Ringach’s harassment and the run-up to the firebombing, UCLA was mostly silent, just when the faculty might have expected some high-level encouragement and protection. The UCLA News Office had labeled the firebombing as terrorism and said: “UCLA condemns that.” Fine as far as it went, but a firm statement from the top was needed, and one was finally forthcoming on 27 August, weeks after these troubling incidents. It came from Acting Chancellor Norman Abrams, who condemns the harassers as terrorists (thereby choosing exactly the right word), promises more security to protect the faculty members who do animal research, and doubles the $30,000 FBI reward for apprehension of the firebomber. That will help, but more remains to be done. It turns out that the folks who are promoting the harassment of faculty have had inside help and participation from students. Yet appeals by researchers for disciplinary action have gone unanswered, even though harassment is a listed violation under the UCLA Student Code.

Meanwhile, there’s more on tap. The ALF has announced its own reward: $10,000 for anyone who supplies information that “leads to the end of an animal experiment or the arrest and final conviction of any vivisector at UCLA.” It’s good that the university is now moving on the problem. But the terrorists, equipped with a kind of moral certainty that cannot distinguish righteous from right, are likely to continue this campaign unless the law of the land makes it clearly illegal and punishable. Fortunately, there is an opportunity for effective congressional action in this area. H.R. 4239 (the Senate companion is S. 1926) has already been heard by the House Judiciary Committee. Entitled the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, it would prohibit threats against researchers and their families and establish penalties for economic damage or for placing a researcher in reasonable fear of death or bodily injury. It also specifically prohibits “tertiary” targeting: actions against those who have a relationship or transactions with animal enterprises, including researchers. The House Judiciary Committee should get this bill out for a vote as soon as possible, before somebody gets killed.

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