

N.C. case exposed organization's hypocrisy

BY DAVID MARTOSKO

Earlier this month a rural North Carolina jury acquitted Adria Hinkle and Andrew Cook — two employees of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals — of animal cruelty charges. The trial garnered a significant amount of media attention, as PETA is the country's most vocal advocate for animal "rights," a radical ideology that sees no moral difference between the animals and humans, and forbids the use of animals for food, clothing or vital medical research.

PETA's spinmeisters quickly framed the acquittal as vindication. Ever since the two PETA workers were arrested in June 2005, they've claimed that the charges were part of a politically motivated vendetta run by interests threatened by PETA's mission.

That seems implausible. The defendants' PETA-supplied lawyers never contested the prosecutor's main accusations: Hinkle, in fact, killed hundreds of potential "companion animals" and threw dozens of their bodies into garbage bins. And Cook helped her carry out her disturbing task at least once.

Nonetheless, reasonable people can agree that if the whole trial was a sham and that the jury made the right decision (and that's a big "if"), it's hard to see the group as anything but hopelessly hypocritical in light of the testimony from PETA's employees.

Norfolk-based PETA regularly orders its staffers to kill animals. Records from Virginia's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services indicate that between 1998 and 2005, PETA "put down" more than 14,400 pets.

PETA claims it is "relieving" them of their suffering.

The organization reshaped that position throughout the trial. Its top brass were quick to condemn their employees' chosen method of carcass disposal. But they never — not once — criticized them for killing animals in the first place.

The trial offered PETA its first opportunity to publicly air its justification for becoming every bit the animal killer as the companies it normally attacks. Like any public-relations bubble that's more rhetoric than reason, this one bursts.

For starters, Hinkle and Cook's furry victims were highly adoptable puppies and kittens. There was no suffering to be "relieved."

One dog had been living with a family for a while and, according to sworn testimony from its previous owner, was only handed over after Hinkle said she would try to find it a new home. An inventory in the PETA-owned van that Hinkle was driving noted, in her own handwriting, that some of the dogs she killed and bagged were "perfect," "adorable" and "pregnant."

Even if, as defense lawyers insisted, adoptable animals like these are destroyed by shelters on a regular basis, PETA is not an ordinary dog pound. Its overall philosophy holds that animals and people are equal in every practical way, and should be treated as such. President Ingrid Newkirk famously articulated this by claiming that "there is no rational basis for saying that a human being has special rights. A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy."

Many find this idea repulsive when it's taken to its logical conclusion. Among other things, the notion of animal "rights" includes the right to not be eaten. And an animal with rights can't be used — however responsibly — in

the search for medical breakthroughs.

Even Newkirk agrees, saying that "even if animal research results in a cure for AIDS, we'd be against it."

So endorsing the killing of animals, whatever the circumstances, is not something we've come to expect from PETA. Yet in front of a judge and jury this month, PETA's defense lawyer argued that animals Hinkle injected with a lethal drug were "PETA's property, and she had the absolute legal authority" to do it.

Remember that the next time PETA argues that ranchers, restaurants or clothiers don't have that same legal authority.

It seems the animal rights movement's message has evolved in such a radical direction that even PETA's employees aren't expected to practice what their leaders preach.

So why should the rest of us be interested in trying?

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PETA's logic says an animal can't be used in the search for medical breakthroughs.