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A 'principled stand' against compassion: Green Mountain College and the slaughter of working oxen (Opinion)

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4

In her first opinion piece for Animal Issues Reporter, Antonia Fraser Fujinaga wades into the controversy swirling around two oxen



— Visitor greeting Bill and Lou / Photo: Christine Celella

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Death threats and violence against Fair Oaks Farms family and employees after animal abuse video

at a
small college in Vermont.

Please note: As a native of Scotland, Mrs. Fujinaga uses British spelling and punctuation.

By Antonia Fraser Fujinaga

The most recent developments in the saga of Bill and Lou, two retired working oxen whom many of us have been trying to save from slaughter, include the following:

- Lou was euthanised on the 11th of November for medical reasons by Vermont's [Green Mountain College](#) (GMC), owner of both animals, and buried in an undisclosed location, according to a statement from the school. Bill remains alive but it is unclear whether GMC intends to fulfil their stated intent to slaughter and serve him in the campus refectory. (Several weeks ago Lou and his work partner Bill were both designated for this fate after Lou sustained a leg injury and became unable to plough the fields and perform other chores at the college's Cerridwen Farm.)
- Philip Ackerman-Leist, GMC's [Farm and Food Project](#) director, sent out a ["Request for Common Cause"](#) to "Colleagues in Food and Agriculture" pleading for support of the school's aim to slaughter the pair of animals who had served the college for ten years—a decision that has brought an uproar of public opposition from outside the college.
- Ackerman-Leist's request received an enthusiastic response from [Rural Vermont](#), an organisation representing the interests of small farms all over the state, lauding GMC's position as a "principled stand for food sovereignty".
- At least two animal rescue groups have offered to provide lifetime care on their own premises for Bill (and, when he was alive, Lou), at no cost to the college. GMC rejected these offers, arguing that allowing the oxen to survive their usefulness, even at someone else's expense, would be incompatible with the university's ethos of 'sustainability' because it would allow resources to be wasted. Reportedly, other offers to buy the oxen, some of them involving large sums, were also rejected on similar grounds.

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Ackerman-Leist's appeal and Rural Vermont's answer have benefited from so much distribution and approval that I feel that it is important to respond to some of the points and assumptions made in these texts.

Bullying and threats

Both Mr Ackerman-Leist's appeal and Rural Vermont's response paint opponents of the slaughter as "extremists" who use threats and other "extreme bullying tactics". While it is almost indisputable that some such behaviour did occur, many or even most slaughter opponents, including myself, expressed their disapproval exclusively through painstaking and futile use of the written word, though our data and carefully presented arguments have so far been ignored, belying Ackerman-Leist's claims of openness to "discourse, diversity, or democracy".

Furthermore, GMC is itself perhaps not 'above' issuing threats. At least one person who had non-threateningly offered written arguments against slaughtering the oxen was the target of a misspelt attempt emanating from within GMC (and purportedly from its president Paul Fonteyn) to report them to their employer, according to attorney Steven M. Wise and sources close to the author of the original email.

Such an action could have the real potential to deprive a person of their livelihood for daring to voice an opinion—an opinion which was misrepresented as "uncivil and hostile", as if the GMC email had been sent out by someone who had not actually read the original message. This goes beyond threats; this could have wrought actual damage if it had reached the intended recipient.

Friends in high places

In this [intimidating email](#), President Fonteyn (or whoever was writing in his name) points out that "the Governor of VT and the Secretary of Agriculture have publically (sic) supported the position of the college". In other words, the email's author emphasises the fact that GMC is strong and has friends in high places.

Likewise, Mr Ackerman-Leist's call for "common cause" is replete with references to how pervasive is the animal agriculture system of which GMC's programme is a part ("the iconic Vermont dairy industry", "longstanding efforts in our region", "burgeoning farm-to-institution programs", etc.); and, in a spectacle of mutual back-slapping by influential establishment figures, it receives the resounding approval of yet

another set of powerful friends, namely the board and staff of Rural Vermont.

It is difficult to see how GMC's position of strength, as an institution in a world where institutions have far greater power than individuals, as the defenceless oxen's 'owner' with the right of life and death over them irrespective of any counterarguments, and as a representative of the "iconic" agricultural establishment in Vermont, can be reconciled with its attempt to portray itself as a victim.

Instead, one might reasonably construe the oxen as the ultimate victims of a deeply entrenched system which, despite well-known data showing that meat production is neither necessary for human health nor ideal for worldwide ecological 'sustainability', refuses point-blank to consider the possibility of plant-based sustainable agriculture.

The 'sustainability' question: are animals essential to agriculture?

The most cogent portion of Rural Vermont's vote of confidence in Mr Ackerman-Leist is the following:

"Truly sustainable agriculture and food production is dependent on animals, not only for the nourishment of their meat and milk, but also for the fertility of their manure, essential to the production of the fruits, vegetables, and cereal crops upon which all of us depend. Indeed, to erase animals from the cycle of agriculture is to ensure dependence on fossil fuel-based fertilizers. Sustainable? Not exactly."

However, there is considerable evidence that meat and milk are not necessary to maintain human health, and that avoiding these may increase longevity while decreasing the risk of several diseases.

The use of polluting agricultural machinery to till fields may be avoidable in the future through 'green', renewable energy sources; for the time being this can also be achieved through the use of draft animals like Bill and Lou who produce considerable amounts of manure.

Whatever additional fertiliser is needed can be obtained without recourse to artificial fertilisers: compost is one obvious option, but ingenious efforts have been undertaken to use human faeces ('night soil'), safely composted to remove pathogens, or even human urine (used in farms, both large-scale and small-scale, in Sweden) as fertiliser. These are only some of the alternative but natural fertilisers which can be employed.

And given the high resource cost of producing meat, the resources saved by refraining from raising animals expressly for their meat would more than offset those 'wasted' by allowing draft animals to survive their working days in retirement (during which they would, of course, produce manure).

Defending the status quo

In other words, Mr Ackerman-Leist's "principled stand for food sovereignty", so admired by Rural Vermont, is not based on ecological sustainability—which, according to a considerable volume of data, would be best served by using plants, not animals, as food—nor on the necessity for animal products in the human diet, nor on the impossibility of avoiding the use of fossil fuels or sustainably fertilising one's crops without eating meat products.

It is not a matter of necessity, but a matter of defending the financially and politically powerful status quo of "livestock agriculture" even if it harms the planet and costs lives—though, importantly, not the lives of those claiming "food sovereignty".

It is also a matter of nestling into the established cultural habit of denying compassion to the sentient beings whose deaths are convenient to us, because challenging that paradigm would not only be intellectually bothersome but also necessitate organisational efforts.

The insistence on killing animals who, like us, fight to the last breath not to die—asking them to die for one's 'principles', without oneself ever having to face the knife, and without considering the tremendous amounts of data and ethical arguments which suggest that they need not die—is difficult for some of us to reconcile with the "courage, reason and civility" which Mr Ackerman-Leist attributes to the advocates of meat production.

It is not courageous to sacrifice others when one's own life is not at stake; it is both reasonable and courageous to be open to data and arguments; and it is eminently civil not to cut throats.

There is irony in a "principled stand" which defends convenience and accords with business interests and culturally established paradigms—a "principled stand" which fights tooth and nail against compassion.

Sources:

Philip Ackerman-Leist's ["Request for Common Cause"](#)

Rural Vermont's reply to it

Email, purportedly from GMC President Paul Fonteyn, to the employer of an individual who peacefully contacted GMC

Human urine as fertiliser - examples:

<http://www.goveganic.net/article217.html?lang=en> and

<http://judynyokabi.wordpress.com/2012/01/18/potential-in-waste-ecological-fertilizer-from-human-urine/>

Safely composted human faeces as fertiliser - examples:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15747455>

http://journeytoforever.org/compost_humanure.html

<http://www.agriculturesnetwork.org/magazines/global/wastes-wanted/safe-use-of-treated-night-soil>

<http://www.agriculturesnetwork.org/magazines/global/living-soils/traditional-night-soil-composting-continues-to>

Scientific evidence in favour of meatless or vegan dining - examples:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10479226>

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19562864>

Ecological impact of livestock agriculture - examples:

<http://www.imbs.uci.edu/CONFERENCES/2006/GRADUATE%20CONFERENCE/S/06-Fiala-Pa0er.pdf>

<https://www.sustainabletable.org.au/Hungryforinfo/Theenvironmentalimpactsofeatingmeat/tabid/105/Default.aspx>

My arguments for meatless agriculture and for compassion, respectively:

<http://urbantimes.co/2012/11/ethics-slaughter-bill-lou-oxen-green-mountain-college/> ;

<http://www.opposingviews.com/i/society/animal-rights/defense-lou-and-bill-oxen-green-mountain-college>

My (non-threatening) attempt to contact GMC:

<http://james-mcwilliams.com/?p=2553>

Antonia Fraser Fujinaga is finishing a PhD about Iranian criminal courts at the University of Edinburgh (UK) but lives in San Francisco with her Japanese husband. She is half Scots and half Italian, and her interests include performing traditional music from Greece, Bulgaria and parts of former Yugoslavia and learning the Indian dance forms Bharatanatyam and Kathak. She cares for several small rescued animals at home.

More AIR on this topic:

[Eating oxen Bill and Lou is “morally preferable” to retiring them to a sanctuary, says college spokesman](#)

[The yoke’s on you, Bill and Lou—or is it?](#)

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Bill and Lou, Green Mountain College, Green Mountain College oxen

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Carol Thompson - November 27th, 2012 at 3:11 pm

and euthanizing then burying the body is not wasting a sustainable commodity??

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Anonymous - November 28th, 2012 at 5:31 am

“Please note: As a native of Scotland, Mrs. Fujinaga uses British spelling and punctuation.”

Which would obviously be the CORRECT spelling and punctuation....

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minibobcat - November 28th, 2012 at 6:52 am

Lou was not put on this earth to serve humans; so his burial is not a waste. His body will feed the ground, the beings in the ground, and eventually produce good soil. Sadly; he was forced to serve humans. Thank you Ms Fujinaga for a balanced article-most vegans would never use animals, such as draft animals; yet it is suggested here so no one can claim she is “an extremist”. She discussed facts, and for that; I’m appreciative. I hope the school changes their mind and gives Bill to one of the offering sanctuaries who have experience in large animals.

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Jomar - May 22nd, 2013 at 2:35 am

Oh my goodness! Amazing arilcte dude! Thank you, However I am encountering troubles with your RSS. I don't know the reason why I am unable to join it. Is there anybody else having similar RSS problems? Anyone that knows the solution will you kindly respond? Thanks!!

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