

# **Innovative Approaches to Address Controversial Issues**

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My purpose here today is not to give you all the answers to the issues that you deal with. My purpose is not to stand up here and bang the drum in support of any special interest. Instead, my purpose is to provoke some thought about the controversial issues that affect you, and provoke some thought about how they can be addressed in order for progress to be made. In short, my purpose is not to tell what to think, but to just help you to think about complicated issues.

This presentation, which was originally titled “Innovative Approaches to Address Animal Activist Concerns”, has been revamped in a generic form to address any controversial issue. These innovative approaches that I have used to safely and effectively address animal activist concerns can be used across any discipline or subject where there are at least two opinions about what ought to be done. The transferability of this presentation can best be described by an experience I had presenting this material at a recent food safety program. At the conclusion of the “Innovative Approaches to Address Animal Activist Concerns” program a participant asked if I would present this program to her church. According to her, the church she attended was experiencing a high level of dissension because of personal differences and issues, which had split her congregation in half. She said that every one of my methods of dealing with the animal activist controversy directly applied to the problems in her church. That’s transferability. So I feel confident that these methods will also pertain to contentious environmental issues.

While this paper has been revised to address a wide variety of issues, it will maintain a focus on issues as they affect agriculture.

## **Two-Sided Versus One Sided Messages**

The first approach I will discuss today is the idea of a two-sided versus one-sided message. As special interests address issues, too many times they feel it is important to “get their message out to the people.” While it is essential to tell your side of the story, there may be a better way than banging the drum for support or making the emotional plea. Which is more believable in the eyes of the general public? – Someone espousing a one-sided and generally rosy picture; or someone who is open and sincere in painting a picture of the whole issue so that the public can analyze the information and reach their own conclusions. Research has demonstrated that two-sided messages are, as a rule, more effective than one-sided messages (Jackson & Allen, 1987).

The best example of a two-sided educational message is the "What's the Beef? /Here's the Beef!" program (Goodwin, 1991a) which introduces the audience to the major concerns of the animal activist controversy related to agriculture. The foundation of the program is the examination of "contrasting viewpoints" (Goodwin, 1993) concerning the well being of farm animals, the prudent use of natural resources, and the safety of the nation's food supply. [Play excerpts from each video]

The opening quote from the "What's the Beef? /Here's the Beef!" program is: *Those who do not know their opponent's arguments, do not completely understand their own* (Bender & Leone, 1989). The use of two-sided educational messages to reveal contrasting viewpoints is what this opening quote is all about, and it has been a very safe and effective method for me use to address contentious issues.

The conclusion of the "What's the Beef/Here's the Beef!" program has also served me well in addressing sensitive issues. In the concluding activity, a beach ball with three different numbers in different thirds of the ball is placed on an audience member's head. The people on the right side of the room see the number 4. The people at the back of the room see the number 8. The people on the left side of the room see the number 1. The person under the beach ball, the closest person to the subject, can see nothing. The point is then made that we cannot learn the whole of a subject or an issue until we hear what everyone in the room has to say about it. That's how wise people acquire their wisdom, and that's how wise people make their decisions. Hence, I give you-"The Beach Ball Principle".

The basis for this "Beach Ball Principle" was conceived from a quote from John Stuart Mill. Mill offers a persuasive case for the consideration of contrasting viewpoints in this excerpt from his work *On Liberty*.

The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any other mode but this (Mill, 1859).

As Mill's quote served as the inspiration for the "Beach Ball Principle," the people whose eyes light up as the beach ball is used in the audience have a difficult time disagreeing with such logic. Educators may best serve their educational mission by valuing and examining "every variety of opinion" as it relates to the "whole of a subject." Such an approach promotes a broader perspective, a more comprehensive understanding, and an increased 'wisdom.'

The use of the "Beach Ball Principle" has served me well as I have addressed the particularly sensitive subject of animal activist concerns about agriculture. After I make use of the beach ball principle, I have in effect defused a potentially volatile situation in

which anyone in the room who has a big problem with anything said in the course of the presentation and vocalizes that concern, suddenly appears very unwise.

### **Perspective Broadening**

The net result of the use of two-sided messages, contrasting viewpoints, and the beach ball principle, is in effect--a broadened perspective. Every one of us can have our own personal biases, and still broaden our perspectives. Having a broader perspective of the issues at hand will harm nobody in this room. The broadened perspective of anyone who addresses controversial issues is essential to making progress, and not just making waves.

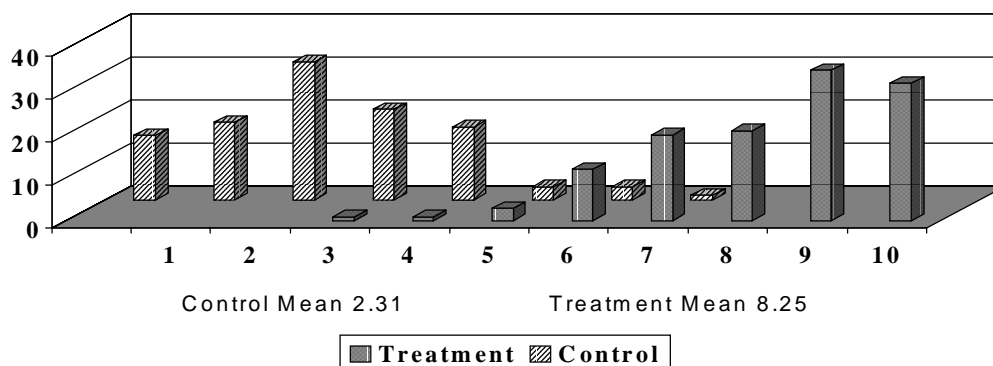
### **Attitude Moderation**

The best way to explain the concept of attitude moderation is to reveal the results of the initial test of the "What's the Beef? / Here's the Beef!" program on 258 county Extension agents of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service in the fall of 1991 (Goodwin 1993). The objective of that study was to compare the knowledge and attitudes, related to animal activist concerns about agriculture, of the agents who were and were not exposed to the program.

Statewide totals of subject matter knowledge scores are shown below in Figure 1. This figure displays the change in knowledge of the agents on this subject as a result of the program. The mean knowledge score of the agents before exposure to the program was 2.31, or they answered 2.31 questions correctly out of a possible 10. The mean knowledge score after exposure to the program was 8.25, or they answered 8.25 questions correctly out of a possible 10. This change in knowledge scores was statistically highly significant ( $P < .001$ ) and inferred to be due to exposure to the educational program and not due to chance.

Figure 1.

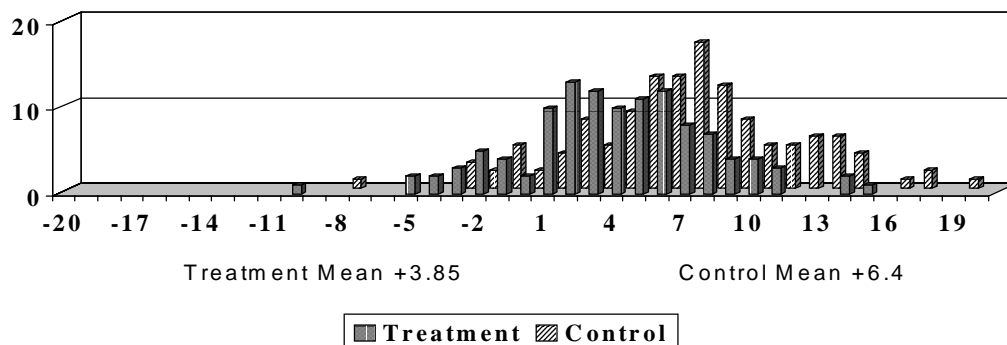
## Knowledge Score Distribution Texas County Agents



The statewide totals of attitude scores from this study are shown below in Figure 2. Individual attitude scores on the scale used could range from +20 (extreme animal agriculture position) to -20 (extreme animal activist position). Individual attitude scores were arrived at by individual responses to ten attitudinal questions. The mean attitude score of the agents before exposure to the program was +6.4. After exposure to the program, the agents' mean attitude score was +3.85. This moderation of attitude scores was a statistically highly significant ( $P < .001$ ) change in attitude scores and is inferred to be due to exposure to the educational program, and not due to chance.

Figure 2

## Attitude Score Distribution Texas County Agents



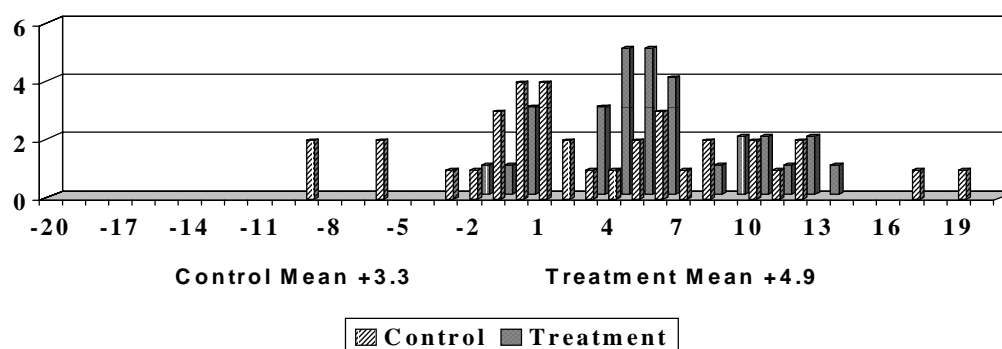
Some people involved in agriculture may see the moderation of attitudes achieved in this study as a threat to their way of life or they might be concerned that I may be switching people over to the "enemy." I would say to them "fear not," and suggest that attitude moderation is a two-way street as attitudes can move from "left" to middle of the scale as well as from "right" to middle. I would also contend that, in general, extreme thinking on either end of this scale is not conducive to sound decision-making. I would also suggest that if the "What's the Beef? / Here's the Beef!" program was presented to an audience representative of the general public, you would expect to see a depolarization of attitudes regarding this bi-polar issue.

To explore this anticipated depolarization of this issue, the "What's the Beef? / Here's the Beef!" program was presented to a group of high school students in Blanco County, Texas (just outside of Austin), in 1992. The attitude scores for the treatment and control groups of this study are shown below on Figure 3. The mean attitude score of the subjects before exposure to the program was +3.3. After exposure to the program, the attitude score was +4.9, a slight move of the attitude scores to the agriculture position.

This difference in mean attitude scores was not statistically significant. In other words, there was no "real" change in the average attitude scores as a result of the educational program. However, the most meaningful finding from the attitude score analysis was a change in the distribution of attitude scores. The attitudes of the control group are diverse (standard deviation = 6.5; range = +19 to -9) while the attitude scores of the treatment group are closer together (standard deviation = 3.7; range = +13 to -2). This change in distribution could be seen as a depolarization of this controversial issue due to the effect of the educational program.

Figure 3

## Attitude Score Distribution Blanco County



### Accurate Versus Positive, Fluffy Messages

Many times both sides of sensitive issues resort to emotional, tug-at-your-heartstrings type of appeals in an attempt to sway public opinion in their direction. These messages are what I term as "positive, fluffy" messages. However, positive educational messages and accurate educational messages are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Positive messages can be accurate while fostering sound education of the audience. But not all positive messages are accurate and not all accurate messages are positive.

Some in the agricultural community are uncomfortable about the scenes shown in the "What's the Beef?" video (Goodwin, 1991b) when cattle processing methods are compared to childhood vaccination scenes. Some major agricultural organization representatives have said that the consumer should never see scenes like that. I disagree. The reason we have a problem is because the consumer has never been exposed to scenes like that. I would rather a consumer see those processing scenes in the "What's the Beef?" video and have a practical explanation for why those procedures are carried out, instead of waiting for an extreme activist group to show the same

scenes from their point of view, topped off with a high level of emotion. Furthermore, the non-agricultural audience those scenes were tested on prior to release of the video said that the little girl in the doctor's office was under more stress than the calf being branded or the calf being castrated. So I have no problem showing those scenes to anyone. Instead of hiding things from the consumer, maybe we ought to educate them.

Most certainly agricultural interests need to promote their products and provide a positive image of their way of life to the consuming public. That's just smart business. It must also be understood that educators employed by local, state, and federal agencies are not in a position to promote agricultural products. Our purpose is to educate and enlighten. Agricultural industry groups can address controversial issues in a manner that educators cannot, and vice versa. Agricultural educators and industry representatives need to recognize the different roles they each play and realize that their respective roles and efforts can complement each other.

With this in mind, I propose that educators who address controversial issues promote an accurate perception of agriculture to the consumer. An accurate perception of agriculture by the public might make some in the agricultural community nervous. If this is the case, we need to either educate the public or re-evaluate the practices that make us uneasy about accuracy.

If the accurate track is taken instead of the positive 'PR' approach, it will mean that when agriculturists see something that needs fixing, they must take the initiative to fix it. Next, the public needs to be informed that agricultural producers have taken the initiative to make sure that things are done right. Conversely, a possible traditional approach may be to sweep under the rug those things that we don't think the public should know or even see. The danger of this approach is that if things are sweep under the rug long enough, its pretty nasty when someone lifts that rug.

An added benefit to the "take-the-initiative-and-fix-it-when-it-needs-fixing" approach is that when agricultural interests make sure agricultural practices are conducted in a practical and morally correct manner, the wind is taken out of the sails of the extreme activist position. In addition, this strengthens public and consumer confidence in agriculture and keeps the consumer informed.

Some people think that when I talk about an accurate message that I am talking about just dishing out the "facts" to the public. Not the case. This Joe Friday "just the facts Ma'am" approach won't cut it. While educational materials and messages need to have a foundation of sound research-based information, there are four reasons why just simply telling the "facts" is ineffective on some contentious issues. 1) The public does not always base their decisions on the facts. Sometimes emotion and the media have a more profound influence on behavior. Remember the Alar Scare of 1989? 2) We can get bogged down in the my-facts-versus-your-facts debate and never really accomplish anything except the alienation of the consumer. 3) Facts are boring. 4) Sometimes facts cannot begin to answer the question at hand when there are deep philosophical differences involved.

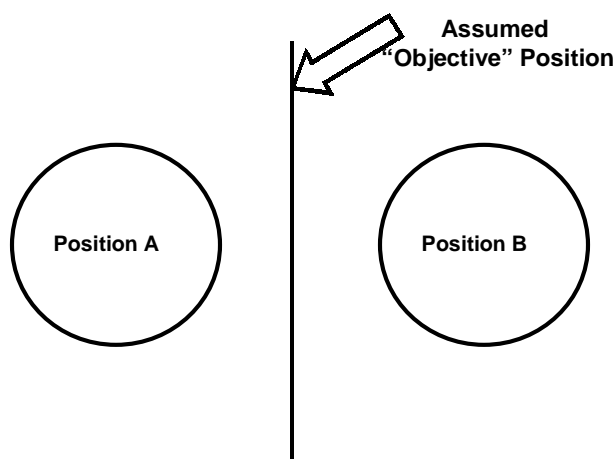
On one hand, many agriculturists say that we need to provide the consumer with accurate information, but on the other hand they say things like we need to never acknowledge the link between the hamburger and a live animal. Wrong! The fact that the public **has** lost the link between the hamburger and a live animal is at the root of the problem of many issues affecting agriculture. The cultural gulf between agricultural producers and consumers, and the social gulf between rural and urban citizens must be addressed in addressing many of the issues of our day. One minor example of bridging that gap is the re-establishment of the link between the hamburger and a live animal. That's what is meant by accurate versus positive messages.

### **Objective and Advocacy Positions**

Many Extension educators feel that in all cases they must be "balanced," "objective," and "even-handed" to all positions involved in a controversy. Typically, Extension educators are in a prime position to do just that: serve as a facilitator and helping to lay out all the alternatives and consequences of two or more competing viewpoints. However, these traditional methods may be best suited to addressing specialized, localized issues with precise and distinctive options and effects and not as well suited to broad, complex social questions steeped in value judgments. As a result, in some cases I disagree with this fundamental approach of always being "even-handed" and "objective" at all cost when addressing controversy.

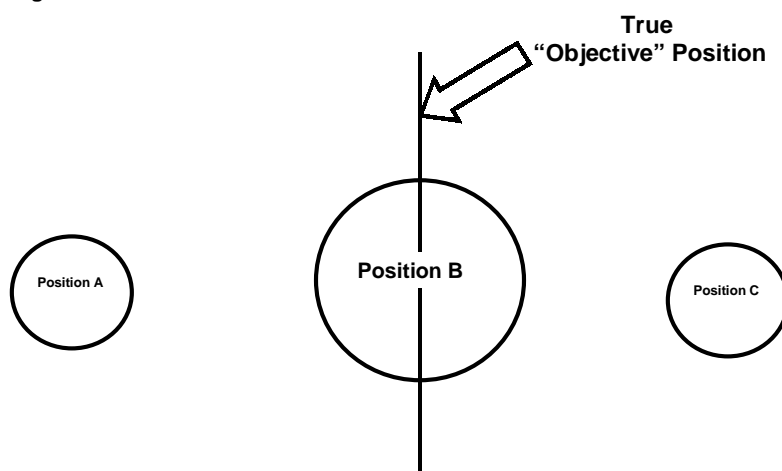
As shown below most people assume that the "objective" position of an issue lies midway between the two positions in question.

Figure 4



But this is only part of the picture. When we look at the whole picture we see another extreme on the other side of the mainstream (Figure 5). If the issue at hand is addressing the conservation of natural resources, the extreme position on the far right might be people who do not utilize resources in a prudent and sustainable manner. The position on the left might be held by preservationists who believe in no, or limited use, of natural resources, and the large group of people in the middle might represent prudent and sustainable use of resources.

Figure 5

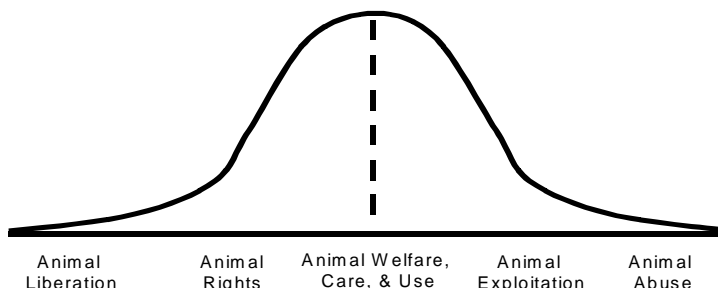


So the "true objective" position would be down the middle of the mainstream commonly held belief. The danger of using the old 'assumed objective" position is that the Extension Educator can be "used" by an extreme position in the name of objectivity, thus short-changing the interest of the many.

Another way to look at this is the picture of a normal distribution of attitudes on a particular subject. If the question of responsible use of animals for the benefit of humans is under consideration the 'true objective" position on the question at hand would be the average attitude of the general public-not half way between the norm and the extreme (Figure 6).

Figure 6

## Normal Distribution of Positions



### Tilling Common Ground with Caution

While the commonalities in opposing arguments or positions can provide the common ground to foster needed consensus (or at least convergence) of attitudes, behaviors, and practices, this common ground should be tilled with caution. Sometimes there is no immediate common ground as positions can be very far from each other. In these cases, to simply strive for common ground just for the sake of being "fair" and "objective" can leave one side or the other with the short end of the stick.

However, if we look hard enough--and if all parties are willing to leave any hidden agendas at home--steps can be made to find common ground. If a range site is infested with a noxious weed, it is unsuitable grazing land for the rancher as well as unsuitable habitat for certain kinds of wildlife. In this case both the rancher and the environmentalist have found common ground that can be used to make a situation better--if both parties are sincere about improving the situation at hand.

### Educational Directions

To say that there are many facets of an issue is nearly always an understatement. We tend to think only of the **biological** aspects of issues: basic animal well-being, farm animal stress, environmental impacts of agriculture, and food safety/human health concerns inherently focus on biology. While many of these issues indeed have a biological base; sociological, philosophical, public policy, and other aspects cannot be overlooked.

Conventional agricultural interests have always deployed strong scientific and economic arguments in defense of their industry. However, the 98 percent of the population not residing on farms and ranches hold an extremely wide range of moral and religious beliefs about the human relationship with animals and the environment--beliefs which ultimately could carry more weight in future policy decisions than will traditional economic and scientific arguments (Becker, 1992).

Our **society** is different than it was just a few years ago. Since 1920 when the United States became a more urban than rural society, American society has become further removed from agriculture and a basic understanding of where food comes from and even how nature works. As a result, more people have begun to question common agricultural practices-particularity in the field of animal agriculture. These changes in our society must be considered when addressing many of the issues facing agriculture.

**Philosophical schools of thought** must also be examined and understood before a full grasp of issues can be obtained regarding the well being of animals, the environment, as well as food safety concerns. Those who address such issues, and who do not know the difference between rights-based and utilitarian philosophies, have just entered a boxing ring blindfolded to face an opponent.

**Public policy educational methods** such as the "alternatives and consequences" approach must also be understood and applied as necessary.

The **inner workings** of issues must also be studied and understood. The key players and key organizations involved with a particular issue, along with their objectives and agendas, are a vital part of the puzzle, which cannot be overlooked.

We need to know **how to respond** to situations, which arise, and how to work with the media is certainly an essential component to addressing controversial issues. While appropriate responses to mis-information and confrontation are critical, this area should serve as a springboard into some of the other essential educational directions proposed.

Last but not least, **economic** arguments are important and necessary, but those arguments may lack importance to the 96 percent of the population not directly involved in production agriculture. In the eyes of the consumer, if something is right--it is right: if it is wrong--it is wrong; and money doesn't enter into the picture.

The person who chooses to be enlightened and in turn enlighten others about any controversial issue has many directions for their efforts to examine. In short, by exploring all the educational directions of a subject the dangerous condition of tunnel vision can be alleviated.

## **The "Bull's Eye" Approach**

The "Bull's Eye" approach is a method to analyze different ways of addressing an issue in order to get at the heart of the matter. Five suggested levels of efforts to deal with issues are offered in this paper.

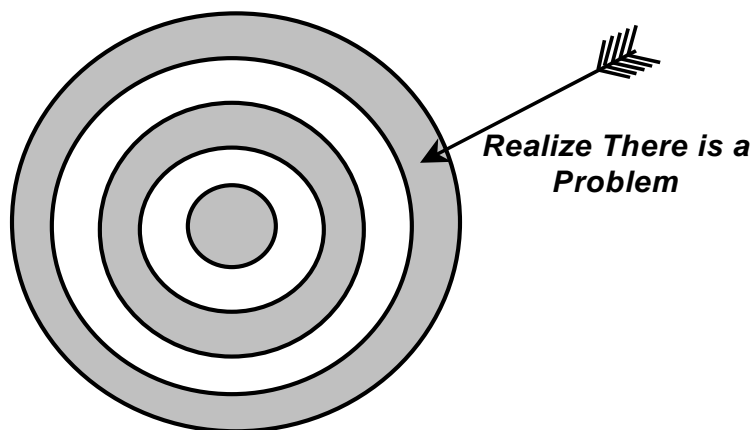
The most common method of dealing with controversy does not even afford a place on the target. Some of my agricultural friends have a solution to many of the animal activist and environmental issues facing agriculture--"We ought to just kick their butts" However, this kind of siege mentality and kick-butt attitude will get agriculture nowhere. This attitude will do nothing except give the general public a bad guy wearing a cowboy hat.

It must also be noted that agriculturists do not have the market cornered on this type of attitude. Some extreme animal activist and environmental groups have condoned the concept of "by whatever means necessary" in order to further their causes.

### ***Realize there is a Problem (Figure 7)***

Whether it's realizing that there might be some things that need fixing or just realizing that there might even be a public perception problem, this is a critical starting place. Believe it or not I still meet people that say that animal welfare, environmental, and food safety and human health issues are non-issues. These people have told me that all we need is a catastrophic natural disaster or a large-scale nuclear war to take everyone's mind off of these so-called non-issues. I hardly think this is an acceptable plan of action to address the issues of the day.

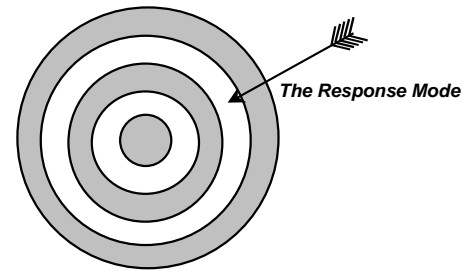
Figure 7



### ***The Response Mode (Figure 8)***

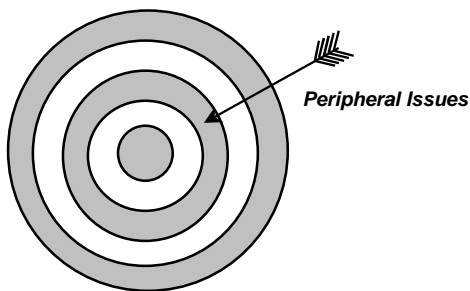
The typical "knee-jerk" response in addressing a controversial issue is to respond to the concerns voiced by those who hold an opposing viewpoint, and to respond to the popular media. However, engaging in the "myths versus facts," or the "my facts versus your facts" battle is a reactive and possibly ineffective method of addressing issues. A total reliance on the response mode has the potential of doing nothing but alienating the general public. While it is important to assist consumers in informed decision making, if the response mode is the extent of educational efforts provided, those efforts may fall short of the Bull's Eye.

Figure 8



### ***Peripheral Issues (Figure 9)***

Figure 9



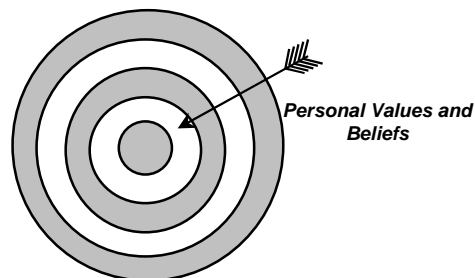
The next level of efforts in addressing animal activist or environmental concerns is the concentration on the long list issues at hand. While command of and attention to these issues is critical, if all efforts and resources are devoted to an endless quagmire of debate, the issues may never be resolved. When this happens, there are no winners.

The response mode and the peripheral issues mode make up the typical approaches taken by many educators and special interest groups. But to get to the heart of the matter we have to go further. We have to get to the core of the issues at hand. How do we get to the heart of the matter? How do we get to the bull's eye?

### ***Personal Values and Beliefs (Figure 10)***

Closer to the bull's eye is the personal values and beliefs of those involved in an issue--producers, consumers, and activists. To explain how personal values and beliefs are involved in issues, and in this example of animal activist concerns, I would like to introduce you to a study conducted by Steven Kellert (1980). Through a nationwide survey of people's attitudes towards animals, Kellert devised a typology of attitudes toward animals. He used ten categories to describe the differences in attitudes. Four of the major categories are:

Figure 10

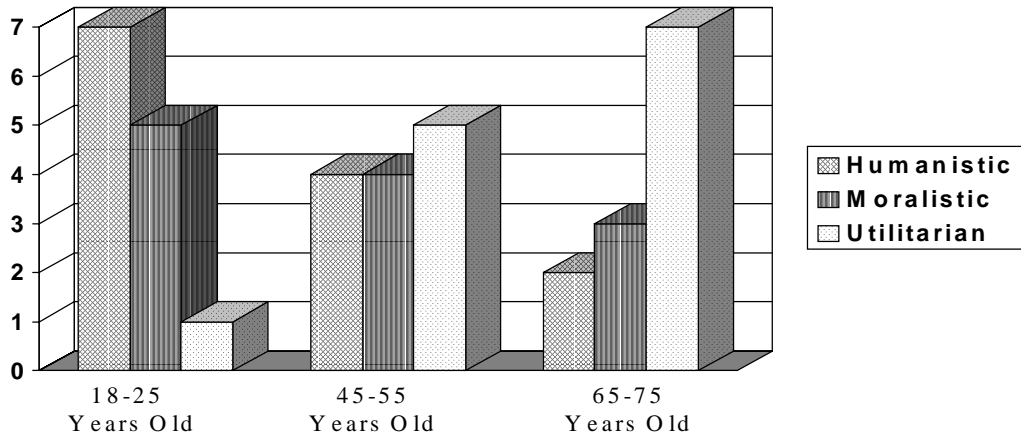


- Humanistic - Primary interest and strong affection for individual animals, principally pets.
- Moralistic - Primary concern about the right and wrong treatment of animals.
- Utilitarian - Primary concern for the practical value of animals and doing what is best for the greatest number of people.
- Dominionistic - Primary concern in mastery of humans over animals.

Kellert's study examined the relationship between different demographic variables on attitudes toward animals. As we look at age groups we see that 18-25 year old people are very high humanistic and moralistic thinkers and low in the utilitarian category, while 67-75 year olds were just the opposite. They were highly utilitarian and low in their humanistic and moralistic thought. The middle age group (45- 55 years old) was in the mid-range of these trains of thought (Figure 11). What does this tell us? Maybe young people just think differently than older people. Maybe young people are naturally low utilitarian thinkers and as they age they become more utilitarian thinkers? Or maybe the older subjects had a larger degree of agricultural background than did the younger subjects? If this were the case you would expect the humanistic and moralistic attitudes expressed by the younger people to be rippling up through the age groups over time as the population becomes further and further removed from agriculture.

Figure 11

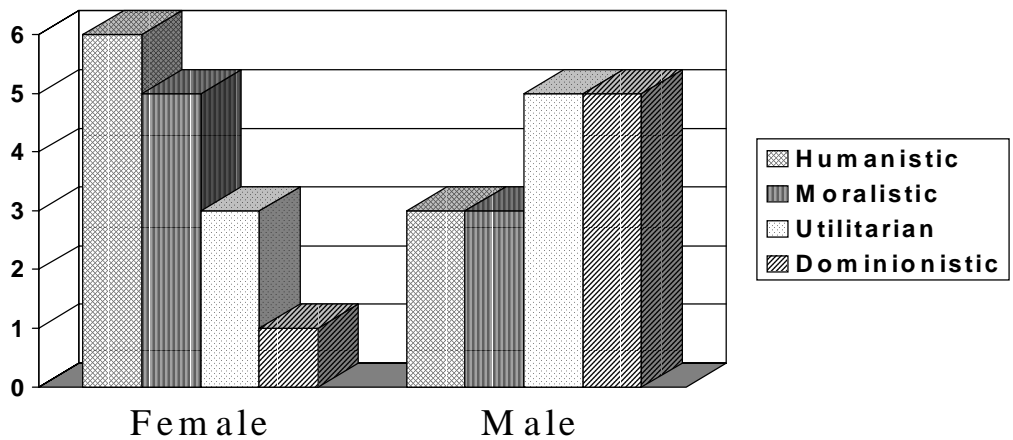
## Kellert Study: Age Groups



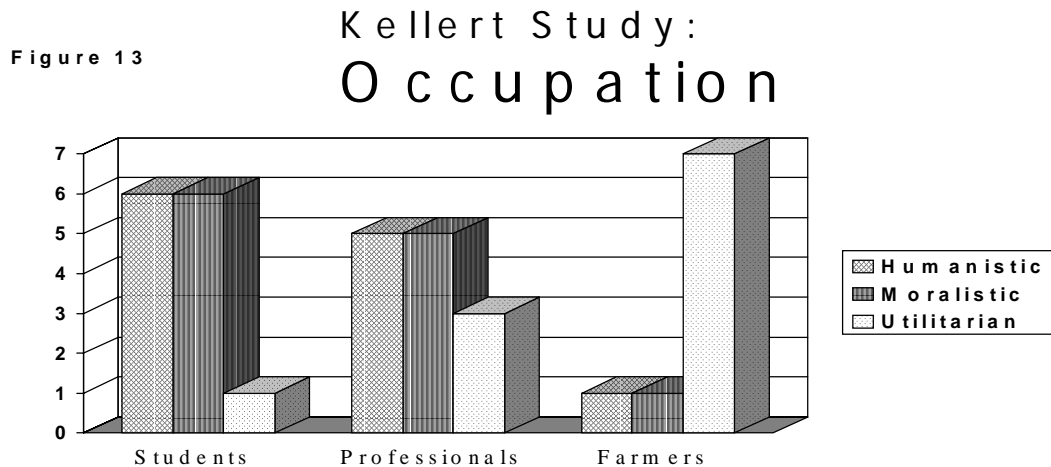
Gender had a definite influence on attitudes towards animals as expressed in the Kellert Study. The female subjects were high humanistic and moralistic in their attitudes towards animals. Males were just the opposite as they expressed high dominionistic and utilitarian attitudes and moderately low humanistic and moralistic attitudes (Figure 12). This gender difference has been documented in other studies and could help explain why a vast majority of animal activists in this country are female.

Figure 12

## Kellert Study: Gender



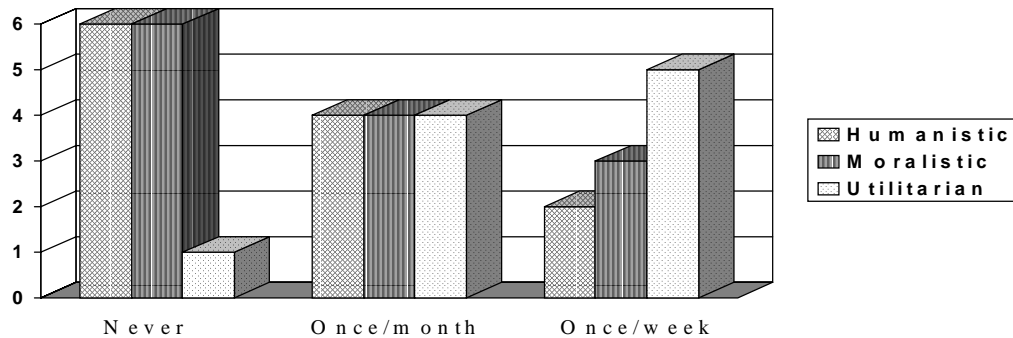
Occupation had a definite impact on attitudes, as college students were very high in the humanistic and moralistic categories and very low in utilitarian thought. Farmers were just the opposite with very high utilitarian thought and very low humanistic and moralistic thought. Even professionals were distinctly different from farmers in their attitudes (Figure 13). The point that needs to be made here is that as educators with an agricultural background develop educational programs and materials to address the many issues affecting agriculture--we might be looking at the subject through our utilitarian tunnel and completely miss our mark.



The last demographic variable of the Kellert study I want to discuss is "Church Attendance." Non-church go'ers hold very high humanistic and moralistic attitudes and very low utilitarian attitudes. Again, just the opposite, people who went to church at least once per week were high utilitarian thinkers and low humanistic and moralistic thinkers (Figure 14). I do not wish to imply who is right and who is wrong--instead the intent is to explain the differences in people's attitudes toward animals. This picture implies that everyone has to have some value or belief structure as a moral foundation. Everyone has to have something to hang their hat on. Some have proposed that the non-church go'er attitude expressed in this study suggests that this group of people may be substituting a value and belief structure in place of that received by the church going group.

Figure 14

## Kellert Study: Church Attendance

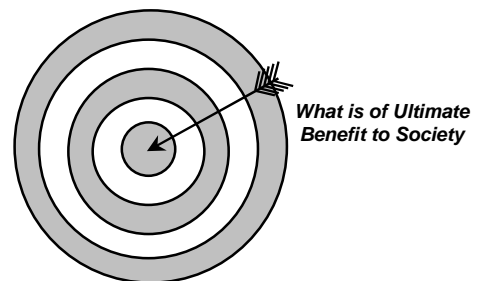


Recognizing and understanding differences in values and beliefs, as explained in the Kellert study, is essential in order to gain a command of many of the animal activist and environmental issues of the day. Some have criticized me for concentrating too much on the differences in people. But both the differences and commonalities of human values and beliefs must be understood before any progress can be made in resolving an issue.

### ***The Ultimate Question: What Is best for our Society?***

Here we get to the bull's eye (Figure 15). We get to the heart of the matter. As we are confronted with many different issues that will be addressed at this conference we have to ask ourselves, "What is of ultimate benefit for our society?"

Figure 15



We need to realize that we have changed the way we do many things during the history of American society. We have done away with slavery. We have made great strides in the areas of women's rights and civil rights. Yes, we have changed the way we have done some things in the past--because those changes were beneficial to society.

With this ultimate question in mind, I propose that individuals who seek change regarding the issues we will address in the next two days will have to demonstrate that the change they seek will be of ultimate benefit to our society. Likewise, the individuals who believe in the status quo option of an issue will have to demonstrate that current practice will be of ultimate benefit to society as a whole--not just of ultimate benefit to their little corner of the world.

If the participants of this conference can focus on this "ultimate question" for the next 24 hours, there is a good chance of real progress being made in the future. If all of us here can drop the facades, leave our hidden agendas and our axes to grind at home--then tomorrow at this time we can all be proud of what we've been a part of here in Socorro, New Mexico. If we keep this "ultimate question" in mind--we can make progress, and not just make waves.

I also realize that there may be some disagreement as to what is best for society. You need only to look at Washington, D.C. to see that this can be a difficult question to answer. So maybe there comes a point in time when we have to agree to disagree. For example, even though the many different religions practiced in this country have varied and conflicting philosophies and doctrines, we peacefully co-exist; because at least in this country, we hold in high regard the respect of other's religious values and beliefs. This two-way respect is a concept that has been lacking from both sides of many of the issues we will discuss at this conference.

To conclude my presentation today, I just want to remind you that my purpose here today is to provoke some thought--to set the stage for some productive dialogue and learning for the next two days. Remember--I don't try to tell people what to think about issues--I just try to help them to think about issues.

You also need to realize that the program I have presented today, as in much of the work I have done with controversial issues, is confined to the initial discovery and analysis phase of public issues education. In other words, I come in and provoke some thought, broaden some perspectives, and moderate some attitudes and then I leave before the policy decision is reached. Hopefully, a just policy decision is easier to reach after the players have been through some of the processes we've discussed today. And sometimes as I take people through this process, I might strike a nerve or irritate some people on both sides of an issue. However, many have told me that if I irritate a few people on each side of an issue, I am probably right on target.

These thoughts, about making a few people mad and leaving before the policy decision is made, leads me to my closing comment which happens to be an ancient Arabic proverb and which I feel is a good description of what it is that I try to do:

***Speak the truth, but have one foot in the stirrup!***

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