**Why bestiality is illegal and viewed by society as deplorable**

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*“Compassion for animals is intimately associated with goodness of character,*

*and it may be confidently asserted that he who is cruel to animals cannot be a good man.”*― Arthur Schopenhauer, The Basis of Morality

About ten years ago a man died in Washington State after being sodomized by a horse. His death brought international attention - not only to the man and his family, but to the very notion that such a thing *could* happen.

At the time of this incident, I was working with a large animal shelter and was asked to take custody of one of the horses who belonged to the man who died. Over the next several years, I had the opportunity to work with several animals who had been sexually abused and was continually amazed at how few resources there were - for law enforcement, for veterinarians, for animal shelters, or for owners whose animals had been stolen or raped or even murdered as a result of sexual predation by humans.

So, I began building those resources, and today I am a leading researcher and expert in the field of animal sexual abuse and exploitation. In that role, I am frequently asked What's the big deal? If the animal isn't hurt, where's the harm? Why should it be illegal? Isn't this just a private sexual practice?

The reason bestiality is illegal is that animals cannot consent (more on that below), and the reason it’s deplorable is that as adults and citizens, we have a responsibility to care for those who cannot care for themselves - like children and domesticated animals. We choose to bring both beings into our lives, and from that moment on we have a legal, moral, ethical, and logical imperative to care for them.

**Zoophilia and Bestiality are not the same thing**

The terms zoophilia and bestiality are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same thing. Zoophilia is human sexual *attraction* to an animal; bestiality is the *sexual interaction* between a human and an animal. Not all zoophiles commit bestiality. Not all acts of bestiality are zoophilic. Zoophilia is not illegal, but all acts of bestiality generally are.

In the U.S. bestiality is specifically or partially prohibited by law in nearly every state[[1]](#footnote-1). The definition generally includes direct contact (e.g. oral or genital intercourse), indirect contact (e.g. solicitation or photographing the act), or any act involving force or coercion (e.g. forcing a child to have sex with an animal in your presence or raping an animal with an object).

**Why this issue is important to you**

***Bestiality is a significant social justice issue, and the full extent of the problem is unknown.*** Virtually all statistics related to bestiality are artificially low and may create a false sense of security that it happens very rarely. There have been very few studies on the topic overall, but the few that have been done indicate that as much as 5% of the population has had some sexual contact with an animal. In the U.S. that means that more than nearly 16 million people are having sex with an animal every year.

Recent research indicates that bestiality may be linked to other criminal behavior such as child sexual abuse, rape and sexual exploitation of minors, possession or production of illegal pornography, property crimes such as trespass and burglary, and possession or abuse of illegal substances.

***Bestiality is not “just” an act of animal cruelty; it is an act of sexual assault, exploitation, and predation.***

The term sexual assaultrefers to sexual contact or behavior that occurs without explicit consent of the victim - meaning that unless both parties agree, one of them is being sexually assaulted, whether or not force is used.

Exploitation means unfairly taking advantage of something or someone else. This term is often used to describe child pornography, or sex trafficking, and generally involves the exchange of sex or sexual acts for food, shelter, protection, or money.

It might surprise you to know that [animals are frequently exploited sexually](https://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2012/03/st_tammany_beer_distributor_cf.html). There's big business in pornography - especially the more extreme versions involving children, animal torture, and death. It's very easy to find animal pornography on the internet, and much of it made commercially - often by [young women who have been trafficked](https://kenyastockholm.com/2013/05/12/swedish-pornographer-bestiality-girls-in-court-in-mombasa/) or coerced into posing for the camera.

Predation is the act of being hunted or seized by another more powerful or dominant being. Many animal sex abusers behave much like sexual predators and abusers of children. They [seek out their victims](http://patch.com/pennsylvania/bensalem/pa-man-takes-cross-country-flight-have-sex-horses-police-0) and may [trespass](http://fox13now.com/2014/07/11/graphic-man-accused-of-having-sex-with-utah-familys-dog/) or break into properties in order to gain access to their sexual targets. They train or condition their animals for sex acts, photograph them in sexual situations, collect and share animal pornography or the animals themselves, talk about their encounters with other sex abusers in private chat rooms, and frequently work in and around animal-related organizations such as veterinary clinics, [animal shelters](http://www.wral.com/tipster-helps-with-arrest-of-man-accused-of-bestiality/12361327/), and barns.

Coercion means forcing another by physical force, or threat or force, to perform an act they don't want to do. A common thread among cases involving incest and bestiality is that a child or an adult is coerced into performing sex acts for the sexual pleasure of the parent or spouse. And the victim's trauma does not end with the initial act: These coercive acts are generally filmed for private use, but sometimes land on the internet and can change the course of a person's life. Bestiality, particularly when experienced as a child, has been shown to be the single largest risk factor and strongest predictor of increased risk for committing child sexual abuse. [[2]](#footnote-2)

***There are significant, measurable links between bestiality and other criminal behavior.***

In an extensive study[[3]](#footnote-3) of bestiality arrests in the U.S. since 1970, we found that 35% of incidents also involved the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Another 40% of the arrests involved rape, extortion, trespass, fraud, theft, domestic violence, property damage, illegal possession of guns or drugs, witness tampering, or death.

**The bottom line:**

The reason bestiality is illegal nearly everywhere in the world is that it is dangerous to society, and we have chosen not to accept it as a sanctioned or protected sexual act. We feel the same way about pedophilia. We changed our mind about accepting same-sex unions because consensual sex or marriage is the result of an informed choice between two individuals of legal age to make a contract with one another. But you cannot make the “consent argument” when it comes to animals and humans because animals cannot make informed consent – meaning that one understands the consequences of one’s decisions. If I offer a treat to a child or a dog because I want to have sex with him or her, the child or the dog will consent to accept the treat but will have no idea what my intentions are or what the outcome might be. It’s consent, but not informed consent.

As a person who specializes in bestiality research, I can also tell you that bestiality is not a victimless crime. Even when animals appear not to be physically harmed, they have been behaviorally altered. Sexually exploited animals are much harder to adopt; are often prone to medical problems such as pyometra, urinary tract infections, and constipation; and often respond in atypical ways that may result in an unsuccessful re-homing. And sadly, some animals are euthanized for having become a victim.

Bestiality is a topic that is difficult to address, and you cannot legislate morals or stop bad behavior with a good law. But this is a crime that has far-reaching implications – not just for the animals who suffer long and silently, but for the families whose animals have been raped; the veterinarians who must treat the ones who are injured or die; for the detectives who must view tragic and obscene videos and search through countless hours of conversations seeking clues to the identity of a perpetrator; and for the prosecutor who must uphold the law whether it matches the crime or not.

If you live in an area where there is no law prohibiting bestiality, do something about that. Protect your loved ones or the loved ones of others. [Visit my website](http://www.mjennyedwards.com/) for an example of a model law. Use other information there to convince your legislator that a change is needed. Support your local animal shelter by donating directly to them so they can build the resources they need to care for and rehabilitate sexually abused animals. And most of all, if you suspect something it wrong, it often is. Report it to animal control or your local law enforcement office.

Thank you for caring enough to ask the hard questions.

*M. Jenny Edwards*

1. As of this writing, Hawaii, Kentucky, New Mexico, West Virginia, and Wyoming have no laws pertaining to bestiality. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Abel, G. G., Harlow, Nora. *What do 44,000 adult males and 12,000 boys with troubled sexual histories show us about preventing child sexual abuse.* National Conference on Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Prevention. Alameda, CA. 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Edwards, M. Jenny; Seigfried-Spellar, Kathryn.  *Variance in Adjudicated Cases of Bestiality in the United States*.  Manuscript in progress, January 1, 2017.   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)