



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 666, Interview with Jessica Bridgers & James Yeates

Mariann Sullivan: Welcome to Our Hen House, Jessica and James.

Jessica Bridgers: Thanks, Mariann. Very happy to be here with you.

James Yeates: Yes, thank you. It's absolute pleasure to be here.

Mariann: I am really excited to have you because I don't know a lot about the work you do, and yet it seems extremely important. Let's just start off with the basics because I'm not sure everybody has heard of the World Federation for Animals, or if they have heard of it, they don't really understand what it does. Can you just explain what it is?

James: Absolutely. So the World Federation for Animals, we are a membership organization that aims to harness the collective strength of the animal protection movement in order to ensure that animals are, at last, considered within global policymaking.

Mariann: And so there are member organizations from all over the world, right?

James: Yes, absolutely. We've got member organizations, of course in the US but also in Africa and in Asia and in Australia. And it's a growing membership, as other people and organizations from other countries recognize the value in collaborating and working together.

Because of course the international policy work is international, it's global. It's bringing together countries from all over the world to make international agreements.

Mariann: You know, a lot of us, or at least I, and I imagine some others can kind of glaze over when hearing about international policy work. There's a lot of acronyms. It can feel kind of abstract. It's a little formal.

I guess most of all, it's a little hard to understand how ideas turn into action. Can you explain a little bit why it's so crucial to work at the international level and how it can help your member organizations do their work at home?

Jessica: So, international policy is really important because it provides, on the one hand, a mainstreaming effect.

So in countries that do have policies for animals already, that's great, but there's still gaps all over the world and countries where there's absolutely no protections at all. So when there is progress at the international level, it gives an impetus for those governments to start incorporating and taking the issue seriously.

It also gives advocates on the ground in those countries a tool that they can use in their national lobbying. So for example, the World Organization for Animal Health has standards for animal welfare that 182 countries have already agreed to implement. And while they may be at varying stages of the implementation, that gives advocates something to call on their governments to do because they've already agreed to do so, theoretically, at the international level.

Mariann: I can see why it would be so important and I can see why it would be a great tool. And you have been developing a couple of really important tools that people can use. But the first thing that I wanted to point out that I love is your vision statement.

When I was looking at your website to get ready to talk to you, I just thought you did a great job with this vision statement, and it's "a world in which animal sentience is respected and all animals live a good life with their wellbeing protected." And I feel that almost anybody can get behind that no matter where they are on the spectrum of animal protection. Which has always been an issue, probably in the US even more than in the UK, of the vegans as opposed to the humane farming advocates and all.

And I think you have allied it and found a vision that...which would be so important for international work. I don't see how it's possible for anybody to not be able to get behind that. I'm just wondering, was that on purpose? Was this a really thought out attempt to find common ground among animal protection

organizations that have, sometimes, some of these internal disagreements that can get so vehement?

Jessica: Yeah, so definitely when we were creating the vision statement, we wanted to create a big tent where everyone who cared about animals in the world could get behind and work together towards a common vision and a better life for animals everywhere.

Mariann: So what does it mean to work at the international level? Are we talking mostly about the United Nations?

Are we talking about treaties? The World Bank? Who is it that you're working with or you're appealing to in order to create international policy?

Jessica: Sure. So we are taking a broad approach. So it is primarily the UN because that is the premier international organization and the most influential. But we also have a project we're working on with the World Bank, which is technically linked to the UN. We are also focusing some work on other international financial institutions. We take a broad approach, but the UN is the biggest.

Then in terms of treaties and conventions, I think our long term goal is indeed to try to achieve some sort of binding policy like a convention or a treaty at the international level that would protect animals. But recognizing that we're going to need several stepping stones to get there and trying to mainstream the issue of animal welfare in the process of getting to that final goal is going to take quite a while.

Mariann: Yeah, this is not a short term project, that's for sure. What do you think are the issues that are most likely to gain traction at the international level?

Jessica: Sure. So at the moment, the two most prominent issues and the ones that are most easy to integrate are farm animal welfare and there's a lot of work on sustainable food systems at the international level. So this can take the form of either reducing consumption of animal products, because there's so many benefits that can be linked to existing goals for the environment and human wellbeing if we reduce the consumption. And then also improving animal welfare in farming to make sure that this is also linked to better outcomes for human health. And also wildlife is very important because of biodiversity. And there's several major international policy conventions that are focusing on wildlife policy. So those are the two main issues.

Mariann: You know, we recently had Joan Schaffner and Raj Reddy on, I don't know whether this is a fair question or not, but they have an effort to enact a convention for animal protection, is that linked to your work at all?

Jessica: So we have met with them and we are happy to collaborate with them. There are a number of ideas floating around at the moment for conventions and treaties, and so I think one of our goals long term is to try to find a way for all the great work and thought that's gone into these initiatives, to try to bring them together and, in a positive way, move forward together.

So I think it's great work that they've done. It's really innovative and groundbreaking.

Mariann: That's good to hear. I think it's always good to hear when people are working on the same thing that they're not just replicating each other's efforts, but working together.

All right. So I haven't really gotten to the issues that we wanted to talk about because there are two major projects or policy statements that you have developed and both of them are very important. And let's start by talking about the manifesto. Tell us what the manifesto is, what it calls for.

Jessica: Yeah, so The Animals Manifesto is a document which combines, I think, the main ideas and desires of the animal protection movement at the international level in response to COVID19. And so essentially how it was created was, at that time it was World Animal Net was, in a way, WFA's predecessor. We worked with our members and together drafted what we saw as the needed response to COVID in the moment of kind of feeling that this was a rare...I don't want to say opportunity in the midst of a crisis. But it was a rare time that policy makers around the world might be more interested and open to hearing about the ways in which changing our relationship with animals could, in fact, be a major tool to prevent future pandemics and prevent future crisis like these.

And so, we worked together to put together this document and it was a really exciting process because we had so much expertise from all of the organizations coming together. So there were veterinarians and animal welfare scientists and lawyers that all collaborated to make sure that it was scientifically based and refine the policy asks.

So we covered the major issues: farm animals, wildlife, animals in experimentation, and then animals in communities, which covered both stray

animals, dogs and cats, and then also working animals around the world. And we also included calls to action for specific policy bodies at the international level. So the UN, UN environment, international financial institutions.

Mariann: Clearly COVID was the impetus for this policy document. But one of the things I really like about it is that it's not focusing specifically on just wet markets in China, even though it's been a little disappointing that there hasn't been more acknowledgement that the last pandemic did come from animal exploitation, but you're really trying to cover not just like as long as we get rid of wet markets we'll all be fine, but all of the many types of animal exploitation that can lead to human disease. Is that right?

Jessica: Exactly, so experts had warned actually for many, many years prior to COVID that this sort of pandemic was something we were putting ourselves at risk for, because of the way that we were interacting with animals in so many different ways. Prior to the manifesto being finished, a UN Environment program actually published a really great report called Preventing the Next Pandemic, which identified seven key drivers, and three of those drivers were actually directly related to animals.

So it was intensive farming, that they identified as one key driver, the increasing consumption of animal products and the increasing exploitation of wildlife. And so we really tried to use this as our kind of framework to expand to other issues beyond just the possible origins of COVID. But recognizing that the research shows that there are a lot of risks that we're facing if we don't change our relationship with animals and the way we are exploiting them.

Mariann: Now, as you mentioned before, your policy documents can be used by anybody at the national level. Do you have specific targets, I don't know whether target is the right word, but people or organizations you're trying to reach with this manifesto to actually create more policy at the international level?

Jessica: We produced the manifesto ahead of a special meeting that the UN General Assembly was hosting on specifically the COVID response, and we were aware that animal issues weren't even remotely on the agenda. One Health, which is a framework that recognizes the interlinkages between humans, animals, and the environment wasn't really on the agenda.

So we wanted to make sure that someone at least put it on the minds of policy makers in the lead up to that meeting. So we did send it to key governments and some of key decision makers in that process. And we also, together with the

organizations that contributed to the manifesto, tried to make some noise on social media in relation to that meeting, so on that hashtag. And we actually did get quite a good number of tweets that were the highest viewed on the hashtag for the event. So I think, that was our immediate goal.

We did, in the months subsequent to that, share it with other policy makers that we thought benefit from seeing it.

In general, the biggest outcome, I would say, from the document was actually bringing together the animal protection organizations and really creating momentum and a sense of unity in our approach and mission. And so I think that was ultimately the biggest outcome. But yes, it was definitely something that we've used to try to educate policy makers at the international level.

Mariann: So how many signatories are there and who are the organizations that have signed on?

Jessica: So we had over 150 organizations signing on. We had animal protection organizations from all over the world. So Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, North America. But we also reached out to environmental organizations, some human rights organizations that work in the sustainable development field. There's also several faith based organizations. So both Christian and I think Buddhist, a good representation of faiths. So yeah, we were really glad to have broad representation.

Mariann: How does it manifesto like this get from talking to action? Is it through the work of your signatories?

And is this supposed to be a kind of guidance for everybody to be kind of working on the same page around the world?

Jessica: Yeah, it's definitely meant to provide some guidance, especially in the international policy space, so kind of bringing organizations out of their everyday work, which is very important of course. But bringing them together to call on the UN, UN Environment Program, and international financial institutions and other UN agencies to recognize the importance of our relationship with animals and how we can improve that relationship to prevent future pandemics.

Mariann: So you mentioned that the setting for the manifesto, and I think much of the work around animals right now is this One Health policy. I don't exactly understand what it is and I noticed you call it One Health, One Welfare policy,

which I like better, because I've seen the animal agriculture industry kind of co-opt the One Health tag.

Is it just an idea or is it a policy? Is it a framework? Exactly what does it mean and how does that concept get translated into policy?

Jessica: Yeah, so it is...I think because of its intersectionality, it can seem really broad and difficult to grasp, but it originally is a concept that has a very strong scientific basis for, I think, at least several decades now.

So veterinarians and public health officials and experts kind of coming together and recognizing that issues that we face can't be addressed in a silo. Like you can't just fix something in public health and...if something is wrong in the environment, it has ripple effects, right? I think most of us who care about animals kind of see these connections more than maybe the general public does.

But yeah, just recognizing that all of these elements are connected, and so if we can improve animal welfare, it has ripple effects to the environment. So if we, let's say, eliminated factory farming, then we have less pollution, we have better air quality, less water pollution and that all has benefits for human health. It has benefits for the environment. So that's a really like clear cut example.

You're right in the manifesto, we do call it One Health, One Welfare. And I will say that at that time when we produced the manifesto in 2020, we, I think, were really optimistic that taking a broader welfare approach would maybe be something that policy makers would be open to. And so we were really trying to push that.

In 2021, it kind of became clear to us in the negotiations that were happening at the international level, that One Health alone was quite contested. So there was certain countries who were very opposed to including One Health in certain documents and agreements, and especially including One Health and animals in the same paragraph was problematic for these countries. So we became really nervous that we were going to not actually move forward at all, and that One Health wouldn't be recognized either. But luckily this year things seemed to have settled a bit, and One Health is definitely very much consensually agreed. I think there's not really a country still opposing One Health framework.

So I think that's good. We didn't get quite as much as we would have hoped from the beginning, but I think this still sets up a great opportunity for us to bring animals into the discussion. And there was also last...I know I've gone on for quite a long time...

Mariann: No, that's fine!

Jessica: but the One Health high level expert panel is an intergovernmental body that's been set up to address and define One Health, and they've actually given quite a progressive definition that does recognize the need for animal welfare in some ways. So I think we are headed on a good trajectory, even if we're strictly focusing on One Health at this point, at the policy level.

Mariann: It doesn't surprise me at all that the one expression that I latched onto and really loved got dropped during the negotiations. It's the story of my life.

So in addition to the manifesto work that you've done in response to the pandemic, but really in response to so much else that was wrong, that kind of came to light as a result...or created an opportunity to bring it to light as a result of the pandemic. There's also the Nexus resolution, which you have been working on, I think even earlier than the manifesto. And how does the Nexus Resolution differ from the manifesto? Are they related?

James: So the Nexus resolution was a specific policy strand at the United Nations Environment Assembly, which this year finally happened and got concluded and got concluded successfully with the first ever resolution there to be tabled and approved with explicit reference to animal welfare.

So it's had a similar journey, in the sense of of time. The idea came from a conference in Africa, with our African regional network or one of our African regional groups, who thought of this idea, brought it to the World Federation wider membership when we started to exist last year. And we've engaged in strategic sort of advocacy across lots of different countries and regions, speaking to all the countries who go to the UN and are represented through our members and wider network, and it led to the resolution being approved.

This year it was a consensus decision through all the member states at the UN Environment Assembly. As well as in itself, recognizing that link between animal welfare and the environment and sustainable development. It also says that the United Nations Environment Program needs to collaborate, particularly on a One Health perspective and to produce a report talking about those links. The things that Jessica were saying we all intuitively recognize. How we treat animals is linked to how we protect the environment and human health and wellbeing. But to actually explore that and bring it together to bring back to all the different representatives of the government's at the next assembly meeting.

Mariann: So at the moment...this is really cool! At the moment, it's kind of general. Do I understand that correctly? That there's a basic principle that animal welfare is linked with environmental and sustainable development, and now there's work being done on what the specifics of that mean. Is that right?

James: Yeah, exactly. There's a recognition that we know these are linked and we can think of examples, but the report is to look at all those different examples and what do they mean in terms of policy and how different countries should then operate in their own countries or what we should agree collectively.

So it's exploring that link and what, therefore, that should mean. How can we strengthen our protection of nature by considering animal welfare, for example? And that's really exciting because this is something that hasn't been considered at the UN. And as Jessica says, the fact that we've got the pandemic, the fact that we've got this coalition such as ourselves coming together, we've got this resolution, means we have a real opportunity now for policymakers to finally recognize animals.

But to do that, they need the information pulled together and really to help them to focus their minds and actually achieve the systemic change across all countries and animals and sectors that we need to transform our relationship with animals.

Mariann: So what are the specifics that you expect to come out through this report? Are we gonna be focusing mostly on farming, on wildlife? The idea of animal welfare is a very broad one. What do you think are going to be the main policy developments that could come out of this?

James: So what we are pushing for is that it does cover that whole breadth because, as Jessica said, how we treat animals in farms has a really strong impact on damage to the environment and on human health but also, as you were saying, so does how we treat wildlife. In terms of how we affect the land, the forest, and the coral reefs, and the interactions that we have with animals.

So we tease all of that breadth and of course, animals are animals, whether you take them out of nature and put them in horrible farming conditions or whether they're out there in a world we are increasingly changing, you know, from local pollution or wider climate change.

So absolutely that animal welfare is for all animals and what we need to change, how we relate to them, that applies to all animals. So it should be broad. It

should be broad, and it should be deep, and it should be a robust report that considers all these different issues. For sure.

Mariann: Do you have a role in preparing this report, or is it now in other hands?

James: So it's to the UN Environment Program to compile this report. We've obviously engaged, given some thoughts and offered help, but it's really down to them to do the report.

That's what the resolution is. We will help in any way we can, and of course we want to encourage and support and provide any expertise or knowledge from our members and others, but it's to be an official UN report. Absolutely.

Mariann: So at the moment we're recording this, we, well not we, but you James, are in the middle of an unbelievable climate crisis.

Because you're having incredibly high temperatures in the UK and at least the news over here, and I'm sure the news over there, seems to be paying a little bit more attention to this crisis that is unfolding before our eyes. Do you think we're entering a much more dramatic phase on thinking about climate and that will affect our policies vis-à-vis animals, particularly in this context?

James: I think we're increasingly seeing that recognition that we need to be doing everything we possibly can and combating some interests that stop that change. So everything we can do to harness systemic change to protect the planet. Animal welfare is clearly a very key part of that, and I'm very confident that will help focus minds of policymakers. But we need to help them to do that. They need to see what those links are. And the same's true even on pandemics, that's a real entry point for animal welfare and other issues to be recognized. But it still needs for that case to be made and to be pushed at national and international levels.

So there's still quite a lot of work to do, but it means we've got now, I think, the opportunity that perhaps we didn't have in the past.

Mariann: We are having a series of unbelievable crises that are creating opportunities. It's hard to celebrate that, but you know what the hell?

One of the things that always worries me when it comes to talking about climate is, chicken is obviously a lot better than beef when it comes to climate, and

that's the kind of idea that policy makers who are not particularly involved with animals love to latch onto.

And of course, as we all know, plants are much, much better than chicken. But the animal welfare implications of increasing the chicken industry are just horrifying, as if it isn't already horrifying enough. So do you have a strategy there or is that one of the things that you would like to accomplish is bring that message in?

Jessica: So one of the things that we are working on right now with members is developing a strategy for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UNF Triple C. So trying to bring animal welfare more firmly into those discussions because we do believe that's a big risk that chickens would just be replacing beef.

And obviously the implications for animals are really horrific if that were to be the case. We're in the early stages right now, but what we were wanting to do is to bring more of the information and evidence together on the importance of welfare and linkages to climate change in order to kind of shift the narrative and try to head off that potential risk in future negotiations in that policy stream.

And, James, I don't know if you had wanted to add a bit to that too.

James: Yeah, absolutely. I think it gives us opportunities to get involved and push for international change, but it also makes it all the more important we're involved to try and stop it reaching the wrong conclusions. And I think one of those narrative shifts is about what assumptions that you make.

So if people are just trying to make minor fixes on current consumption levels in many developed countries, well then we are going to face perceived trade offs. But actually shifting how we think about our relationship with animals means more fundamentally, actually that's not a trade off we need to make. As you said, Mariann, we can change our diets is another way of stopping having that conflict. So I think it's again, pushing on those narrative shifts amongst policy makers as well as the public that's gonna help us sort of make those risks less, as well as taking the opportunities to achieve the changes animals need.

Mariann: You have convinced me. I started off saying that it's hard to understand, for most of us, it's hard to understand the work that's going on at the international level, but you have both certainly convinced me that it's absolutely vital.

And just because it's like four steps removed...you know, I think that's the thing that I was getting at before, which I didn't really articulate. It's so many steps removed from something actually happening, you have to convince somebody and then they have to convince somebody, and then you have to convince the UN and then the UN has convince governments and then governments...but it's absolutely vital.

I mean, because there are animals all over the world and because somebody has to be setting these policies and when these governments have places to turn to find out these facts, particularly when these emergencies hit, as they seem to be hitting more and more often, it's so important to have animals in the conversation.

I'm thrilled that you're doing this work. Thank you so much, and thank you for joining us today. Just before I go, tell people where they can find out more about your work,

James: The best website is the wfa.org website. There's a page for NGOs potentially looking to be members, would absolutely encourage that.

But there you can find information on what we are doing and I think sign up for further information as well. So please, go to wfa.org.

Mariann: Thank you so much to both of you. It's really been fascinating.

James: Yeah. Thank you, Mariann. It's been a brilliant conversation. Thank you.

Jessica: Thanks for having us.