# Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 684, Interview with Elan Abrell

**Mariann Sullivan:** Welcome to Our Hen House, Elan.

**Elan Abrell:** Thank you.

**Mariann:** I've been wanting to interview you for a long time because you have written a book about what is, I think, my favorite subject, and so many people's favorite subject, and that is sanctuary. Sanctuaries are so important to people in this movement.

It's not a super academic book, it's accessible to regular people, but it is an academic book, and you write it from your perspective as a cultural anthropologist. And I just thought I would start off by asking you; what is a cultural anthropologist?

**Elan:** A cultural anthropologist, people might associate it more with sociology than what a lot of people think anthropology is.

But it's essentially anthropologists who study the different aspects and dimensions of material and immaterial culture, too. Everything from music to art to folklore to culinary practices, to how people organize themselves and feed themselves, and everything in between.

**Mariann:** Okay, cool. So about life on earth by humans, big topic!

**Elan:** Yeah, exactly. And how humans make meaning of that.

**Mariann:** Well, that seems like a really important aspect of how we think about sanctuaries because there are a lot of questions about how we make meaning of them. It’s really obvious from your book that you care a lot about animals.

You make that clear right from the start. And that has been a major motivation for you in deciding what to study. But why did you focus on sanctuaries specifically?

**Elan:** There is a longer version of how I got to this, but I was bouncing around to different projects in grad school and came to an epiphany that I would be a lot happier if I were doing a project on animals rather than treating my interest in animals as a private-life thing and not a professional thing.

When I came to that conclusion, I immediately thought about the different ways in which animals are treated horrifically by humans in human society and the need to further expose that and talk about it. And books, since I first started thinking about this, had come out, like *Every 12 Seconds,* that really get into what's going on behind the scenes in animal agriculture.

But I knew that I couldn't personally handle being in a setting where I was going to be around violence or mistreatment of animals on a regular basis. And at the same time, I was sort of wondering about this idea; what motivates people to really care for animals? I feel like the question is often like, "What can we do to convince people to care more about animals or change the way that they're behaving?"

But I thought that there hadn't been much real discussion or investigation of what were the experiences of people who already care about animals. And I thought maybe the best place to go and look at that was sanctuaries. People who work at sanctuaries are literally giving every hour of their waking day to care for animals who've been rescued from all kinds of horrible situations.

So that was the catalyst for looking at that as an area to investigate. But then, once I ended up doing the fieldwork and getting to the sanctuaries, I realized that there are other kinds of interesting things to explore and look at and ask questions about, beyond that one initial question.

**Mariann:** Yeah, as so often is the case, everything turns out to be so much more complicated and interesting than you think at first.

But I love that it started with that because that's a really excellent point. We spend so much time thinking about how to convince other people to think like us. I mean, I know a lot of vegans; they're not necessarily better than everybody else.

Maybe one or two of them, but most of them are pretty regular. And there are many, many people who don't seem to care about animals at all, who are wonderful, wonderful human beings, in so many ways.

So what is this thing? What is it that we get and they don't? Of course, I would put it like that, they probably wouldn't.

That is a really interesting motivation, and I really wanna get into the questions answering your big question of what makes people care about animals, but also the many smaller questions that you uncovered in doing this research.

But first, how did you start, how did you pick the sanctuaries you studied, and also how did you determine if they were legit? Because we all know there are sanctuaries, and then there are quote-unquote sanctuaries.

**Elan:** Yeah. Well, I was doing all this as a graduate student in grad school when I did the research, and I started out by breaking it up into, I mean, this is my imposed conceptual framework, but I am not sure that there are a lot of better ways to do it- which is looking at the different kinds of sanctuaries and how it seemed to me that they were responding to different ways in which we use animals.

I suppose that there are ways in which sanctuaries can be organized completely differently, but anybody who's familiar with sanctuaries knows that there are sanctuaries that rescue formerly farmed animals, and then there are sanctuaries that deal with captive wildlife or sometimes called exotic animals.

And then there's the companion animal sphere, which is often handled much more through shelters, although there are companion animal sanctuaries as well. And so there are some additional spaces there that sanctuaries have addressed, like specifically primates who are used in laboratory research and things like that.

But it seemed to me these were sort of the three basic general categories, and in designing the project, I knew I wanted to do a sort of comparative analysis and get a broad perspective on the different ways that people approach the act of rescuing and saving and then caring for animals. So I tried to find a place for each one of those categories: companion animal, captive wildlife, and farmed animal sanctuary.

I think it's generally not hard to find legitimate farmed animal sanctuaries, especially if you're familiar with the movement at all and you've maybe gone

and volunteered in places. All the good ones have built up really good reputations for themselves over the years, so I didn't think that was particularly difficult.

When I started out doing the captive animal sanctuary, I actually ended up in a…I write about it a little bit in the book, but it was one of those ones that you just mentioned as not a legitimate sanctuary. I don't think it was for bad intention reasons. I think it was for a lack of resources and a general sort of incompetence in running the facility. But I saw animals that were pretty unhappy at this small sanctuary in Florida, and I realized, really quickly, that this was going to be a bad case study if this was the representative case of what I was gonna talk about as captive wildlife sanctuaries.

So I actually looked at the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, GFAS, which is the sort of most respected accrediting organization for sanctuaries, and it's a voluntary process. Sanctuaries don't have to get accredited there, but it is a respected organization that has standards for the bare minimum of what sanctuaries should do to properly care for animals.

And I found one that was already accredited by them, and it happened to be near some good family friends, so I could stay with them while I was doing the research. I had to get permission at the time because I had a National Science Foundation grant to do the research, and I had to ask if I could change my location from what I'd put in the grant proposal. And, if you read the book, you know that the sanctuary is in Hawaii, and the grant operator at the time was like, "Yes, you could switch. Poor you. You have to go to Hawaii now…" *both laugh*

**Mariann:** I was thinking the exact same thing. It's a really tough assignment. *both laugh*

**Elan:** Yeah. And then the third side I did was a companion animal rescue organization in Texas.

I stumbled upon that somewhat through where I was in life. I was living in the area at the time and had started volunteering with them before I even thought of the project. So I just stuck with that as a site.

**Mariann:** So, when you start thinking about it as you do in the book, these sanctuaries, they're all sort of fundamentally the same, but they serve very different purposes.

Can you just go into that a little bit; how much do they differ?

**Elan:** Yeah, so, like you said, they definitely differ in the purposes that they're serving. So farmed animals are domesticated species almost always, which means that they're, for the most part, individuals of those species are not going to be able to do well living in the wild.

And there aren't really a lot of wild spaces in the United States where they could, even if they could survive on their own, be left alone. And so when animals are rescued from farming situations, it's almost by necessity they have to still be in captivity. And so farmed animal sanctuaries are focused on providing lifelong care for the animals that they rescue and giving them the best lives possible within that captive space.

It's similarly true for captive wildlife. There are organizations that do wildlife rehabilitation and reintroduce animals, but a lot of animals that are ending up in these sanctuaries, like if anybody has seen *Tiger King.* The tigers in Carole Baskin's sanctuary, not Joe Exotic's, are not going to be able to be released into the wild, ever, and so also need to live in captivity, and it's the same idea, but there are many different needs that captive wildlife might have that farmed animals aren't going to have.

Farmed animals are almost, as far as I can think of in the moment, all capable of living on an herbivore diet. There are carnivores in captive wildlife sanctuaries that necessarily must eat meat. And so there are these sorts of issues that arise around the choices you make ethically about how to care for animals that sometimes might involve harm to other animals. And then companion animal rescue, as most people know, is largely more on a shelter model where animals are coming in and hopefully living there temporarily until they can be adopted by a family or a home and go live with the humans somewhere on their own.

Although animals do end up never getting adopted sometimes, for various reasons, and there are places that care for some animals that can't ever be adopted, maybe because of behavioral issues, they're not going to be safe. They were maybe abused when they were younger or trained to be fighting dogs, for example. And so they're gonna be better off living in a sanctuary setting.

So the difference in which kind of animals are being cared for is partly shaped by the way that humans treat different kinds of animals. But then there are also a lot of differences in the perspectives of the people, about animals, who end up working in different institutions.

I, going into it, assumed that everybody I met was going to be vegetarian or vegan, at least into animal welfare, if not animal rights. And I realized that it was actually a really broad spectrum of attitudes and perspectives. Everybody I met cared about the animals that they were working with at the institutions they were at, but outside of those institutions, they might have totally different attitudes about eating meat or, quote-unquote pest control or how to treat invasive species. And so I was definitely struck by that early on, to realize that there was what a lot of us vegans might call cognitive dissonance in the way that people were caring for some animals and then going off and having a fundraiser at the burger place for the shelter or whatever.

And so that was another way in which they really differed.

**Mariann:** Yeah, it has always been such a fascinating aspect of all of this for me, that so many people who devote their lives to companion animals, like, really are so much better than I am in every possible way, just don't go into the broader picture. You would think that would be our logical next step, the next people who would kind of wake up to the full picture. But, you know, I don't understand people at all, so I shouldn't be in charge of figuring out next steps.

A lot of the things that you mentioned about how these sanctuaries differ involve death, and as you point out in the book, sanctuaries involve enormous amounts of death of various kinds. Can you kind of elaborate on that?

You mentioned that people aren't vegan, and the animals aren't vegan, necessarily. So how does that all play out, and what are some of the various attitudes towards it?

**Elan:** Yeah, so I'll start with farmed animal sanctuaries again because that was the one space where it really kind of conformed to my expectations.

Everybody I met was a vegan, or at least while they were working at the sanctuary, embraced veganism. And in those spaces, you don't have to kill animals or feed animals meat in order to keep the other animals alive.

**Mariann:** Right. None of those animals are carnivorous in any way.

**Elan:** Right, and so in that space, death really came up in relation to the health and suffering of animals. So as probably a lot of listeners know, industrially farmed animals are almost all killed at what, in humans, would be the equivalent of like toddlers or, at the most, early adolescents. They are killed very early in what would be a much longer lifespan.

And at the farm sanctuary, they started figuring out early on, when sanctuaries first started popping up…Well, the original Farm Sanctuary in the early eighties…is that there's this whole range of health problems that geriatric farmed animals can get that there wasn't a lot of veterinary knowledge about, or techniques for treating, or necessarily even medications or veterinary technology for addressing.

And so sanctuaries still are doing this, but in the early period especially, collaborated with vet schools, for example, to develop ways to treat these issues as they came up. But because industrialized agricultural animals are not just treated very badly in the conditions that they're in, but they're also selectively bred over many decades to maximize the most flesh production or the most milk production, or the most egg production, this introduces its own range of health problems for animals.

So this is a very long way of saying that they end up often having conditions that cause pain and suffering. And so there's a decision that needs to be made, at certain points at sanctuaries sometimes, for animals, about if the quality of life is so bad that maybe the kindest thing to do for them, or the best thing to do for them, would be to euthanize them. And I'm using euthanize in the literal sense. If you break down the word, it means sweet death. And we talk about using it to help somebody who cannot live, any longer, a happy life. They're suffering too much to be able to enjoy life anymore. Not in the sense that it's often used to talk about killing companion animals, for example, that there's no space for them.

**Mariann:** Yeah. The use of the word euthanasia is a pet peeve of mine, and I was very glad to see it was of yours as well. I mean, it's a word that means something, and we should use it in that sense, not to make ourselves feel better about killing animals who are inconvenient.

**Elan:** I totally agree, and I think that's the way that death comes up the most at farmed animal sanctuaries. It’s a very difficult moment for people, humans, who have very close relationships with the animal people that they've been caring for, having to make these decisions. Much like we, as humans, might have to do for loved ones if we had a society that was generally a lot more open to being able to offer euthanasia to humans as well.

But I think anybody who’s had a long relationship with a companion animal that they lived with throughout the companion animal's entire life might have had to confront this same kind of decision-making process at a certain point where you are having to decide whether or not you might need to euthanize a loved one.

So as I've sort of mentioned already, in captive wildlife sanctuaries, there are carnivores, and so either those sanctuaries are buying food that's already coming from the pet food industry, which is another part of industrialized animal agriculture, or they're, as I saw at the sanctuary where I was, sometimes killing animals there to feed to other animals.

So the sanctuary I was at would feed mice and baby chicks to raptors, and they would kill them quickly. They wouldn't feed them live to the raptors so that they would suffer as little as possible, but it was still a decision that some animals were going to die for other animals, essentially.

And then there's also the issue of predators that can come into a sanctuary. So actually, this can happen at farmed animal sanctuaries as well. Bears can come in, weasels can come in, rats can come in, and kill animals. And so that's another way that death can sort of surprise you in a sanctuary.

And so farm sanctuaries have to, as much as possible, build structures that can keep out predators. But the captive wildlife sanctuary I was at, for example, chose to kill predators, which is another example of the difference between places and different attitudes about animals. And I realized that part of the way the decision-making process is done for people is that there are patients of the sanctuary's care, and then there are animals that are excluded from that.

And then that's how what otherwise would be a contradiction for a lot of people is resolved. That this mongoose, for example, is going to get killed to prevent the mongoose from killing all of the waterfowl that live in a particular area in the sanctuary, at the captive wildlife facility where I did research.

And then, as we've also kind of gestured to, in companion animal rescue, there are a lot of facilities, open admission shelters, that do kill a certain amount of animals that come in to make space for other animals. Maybe they aren't as adoptable, so they're concerned that they will be taking up space longer, and so they make the decision to kill them shortly after they come in. Or they're at the facility for a certain amount of time, and it seems like they aren't going to be adopted.

And so maybe the decision about how to kill the animals to make space is made differently in different places, and I don't want to speak too much for those places because I didn't do research at an open-admission shelter.

**Mariann:** You were at a no-kill shelter, quote-unquote no-kill shelter.

**Elan:** Exactly. But even in that space, as I write about a little bit, there are occasionally animals who are assumed to be un-adoptable because they've been there for months, because they might have aggression issues, in certain contexts, that make people afraid that they would hurt a person that adopted them. And so they're trying to work with them, help them get rid of some of those reactions so that they can be safer to be adopted. But if a dog, for example, bites somebody a couple of times, they might start considering the possibility that they're in a situation in which he or she cannot be adopted ever. And the alternative to killing, in that situation, is living in a shelter space forever, which is not designed for companion animals to live in forever. So I think different places weigh their decisions differently, but that's sometimes what's decided.

**Mariann:** Yeah, and no matter how we weigh these decisions, I think it's important for all of us to respect the fact that they're very hard decisions. And some people take them lightly, and that's wrong. But a lot of people take them very seriously but still end up killing, not necessarily euthanizing, but killing, but it doesn't mean that should be the subject of a lot of attacks, which is so often is.

Before we started talking on this interview, we were talking about how too often what we do in this movement is criticize each other rather than coming up with good ideas on how to handle things, in so many different contexts.

And yeah, these are tough; sanctuaries have tough, tough questions. And do you think that, ultimately, sanctuaries can give animals good lives? Is it worth it?

**Elan:** Oh, I do. Absolutely. Yes. I think that captivity for non-human animals is always going to put limits on the possibilities of happiness or thriving that would exist in an ideal world in which those animals would not have to interact with humans at all if they didn't want to, and they could make their own choices. But I think that many sanctuaries do a fantastic job of giving very good lives to animals that otherwise would've had much worse lives.

And I think, although we always have to be careful about projecting onto animals when we try to understand what their interests or needs are, I think it's probably a safe assumption that most animals would prefer to live a pretty good life than to be killed because they can't have a perfect life.

**Mariann:** Yeah, I agree.

Another function of sanctuaries or some sanctuaries, not all sanctuaries, is their visitor programs, particularly in farm animal sanctuaries. People do differ on

whether there should be visitor programs, and whether they're a good idea. Some people think of these animals as refugees, who should be left alone; where do you come down on that?

**Elan:** I'm actually not sure where I come down on that.

It's an issue that I write a lot about in the book, and I guess where I come down on that is that I respect the choices different sanctuaries make because I see both sides of the argument, so to speak.

It makes a lot of sense to me to see a sanctuary as a space that it belongs to the animals. It is like their home, for lack of a better word. It's like a town or a community, a multi-species community, where all the animals there live, and it's theirs. And so there's a lot of sense to the idea that you should decide who comes into your community and who doesn't.

And if somebody else is deciding that they're going to turn your community into a sort of tourist spot, for example, and you don't want that, then it is a violation of agency in a certain way. It is taking away your ability to have the privacy that you might want. And so I think it makes a lot of sense to say, "Okay, the sanctuary space is just for the animals, not for humans to come in, and look and learn."

On the other hand, sanctuaries are responding to just one of the most horrific systems of violence and exploitation humans have ever, probably the most horrific one that humans have devised in history, which is industrial animal agriculture…well, the industrial animal complex, the use of animals in lab testing and other ways as well. And I think that sanctuaries have a really important function culturally, which is my anthropology perspective coming in, in teaching others, or modeling for others, how we can think about and relate to animals differently.

So I see the value in doing tours if they're done in a certain way, where humans can come and actually learn from the space, and the animals might have the opportunity to still avoid humans if they want to. So it's not maybe as ideal as a situation where humans are just absent, other than the caregivers, but it doesn't have to be done in a way that is like a petting zoo, for example.

Which, to be clear, all the farm sanctuaries I've been to do not do tours like a petting zoo, although I think that people struggle with how to make those kinds of interactions impactful too, because you deal with the possibility that people coming might be seeing it as essentially just a trip to the petting zoo and not

particularly interested in learning everything else that is a part of the tour. And hopefully, the tours are designed in a way that can be really impactful so even people like that will come away from it learning something. But those are a lot of the considerations that I think sanctuaries ask themselves in designing the tours.

**Mariann:** Yeah, you lay that out really well because I don't know where I come down on it either.

I guess a lot of the questions that sanctuaries are dealing with have to be taken in the context of the world we live in. It's horrifying, and we're trying to deal with that. Creating an ideal for these animals in this world is difficult because the world is so far from ideal.

One of the questions that animal advocates get asked a lot, or vegans get asked a lot, is, what would we do with all the animals if everybody went vegan? And obviously, if everybody went vegan at the same moment, this would be an issue. The chances of that happening are probably not so high that we really should torture ourselves trying to figure out the answer.

But is the goal of the sanctuary movement to lay out how we could live together with animals in a benign way? Or is it just to be no longer needed?

Would it be best if there were no more sanctuaries because we're just not eating the animals, we're not overbreeding the animals, and we're not exploiting exotic animals; they're all living in the wild? Is that the idealistic goal of the sanctuary movement, or is it to always have these animals there for us to communicate with?

**Elan:** I think the sort of logical endpoint of the sanctuary philosophy would be a world in which sanctuaries no longer existed and there was no need for them.

But what that means is humans' relationships with animals would be really different, depending on the species and which animals we're talking about. So it wouldn't necessarily mean that we would never have any contact with them again. But I do think that the space of sanctuary is one that exists because it's a response to a world that is fundamentally not safe for animals or welcoming to animals.

And so, if the goal were to keep sanctuaries forever, then it would sort of be more of like a refugee camp model where it's like these problems are always going be there, and we're always going to have spaces to help them. That might

be the reality that we live in, at least for our lifetimes. But I think it's not the end goal.

But that question of what would happen to the animals, I always find to be kind of an obnoxious red herring question. Because as you pointed out, we're not all gonna go vegan tomorrow, but…

**Mariann:** And if we did, the world would be such an amazingly wonderful place that we'd figure it out. *both laugh*

**Elan:** We would figure it out. And humans make billions of animals a year in order to kill them. So if we suddenly stop killing them, we presumably would also stop forcibly breeding them, and all of these other issues would sort of start to resolve themselves over time.

**Mariann:** Yeah. It's such a favorite, and it's always such a gotcha question. Like they figured out the big problem with the animal rights movement. Really? *Mariann laughs*

**Elan:** Yeah. The other one is the idea that, like, "I'm afraid that cows and chickens are going to go extinct," but animal agriculture's driving the extinction crisis. If you're worried about extinction, you should want to eliminate animal agriculture.

**Mariann:** Yeah. And like these deformed animals, the horror that they should go extinct, the way they have completely deformed these animals through their crazy breeding practices.

All right, let's talk a little bit about the people because we've been talking about the animals. And anyone who has ever cared for an animal, in any way, knows it's a lot of work to do it, even in a remotely decent way.

Caring for an animal is just a huge job. Working at a sanctuary must be that multiplied by a gazillion. Why do so many people want to do it? What is it that drives (them)? People go to these conferences on how to start a sanctuary. So many people say that's their dream. What is it that drives people in that direction?

**Elan:** That's funny because that was my initial question, and I don't know that I really got an answer. *both laugh* I mean, I think that having relationships with animals is, I think, a catalyst for a lot of people who decide that they want to do

it. And I'm not a psychologist, so I don't know if there's sort of a predisposition that makes somebody more inclined to empathy and openness than other people.

But I do think a common thread for people who decide to either become full-time caregivers and work for salaries that are not great…and not because the sanctuaries are trying to exploit anybody, but just because they have limited resources and you can't necessarily afford to pay somebody a really awesome living wage. But I've met a lot of caregivers who have just decided, "Oh, I wanted to volunteer, and so I went in, and I was an intern, and I fell in love with this whole thing, and I want to do it."

And there are people who, especially around farmed animals, I think maybe just like the rural lifestyle to some extent, doing the kind of work that comes with being out there and being with the animals. It is pretty amazing, in my experience, to be able to go into a field of goats or sheep and have a bunch come over and want to say hi and check you out. It's something that I could imagine being very happy doing my whole life, the animal interaction part.

The work itself is tremendously difficult, and I would advise people, I have a whole chapter about the sanctuary conference and learning how to do it, and I would advise people to not do it. Unless you know for a fact that you can give that much time, that you can get the resources to take care of the animals you take in, and that you might never really do much else outside of that.

I have friends who, when a companion animal passes away, decide they're going to wait a while before adopting another one so that they can do a little traveling, which is really hard to do when you need to find somebody to take care of a companion animal. Starting a sanctuary is that times a million. You're essentially just always going to be there, caring for animals.

But I think that beyond that sort of personal desire to help and interact with animals, a lot of people who are doing the sanctuary work are aware, on some level to varying degrees, that they are showing a way to respond to this world that seems sometimes just built to kill animals and hurt animals.

That there is a different way that we could structure things. And I think it can be really depressing when you think about how hard it is to change the world. And I think that for some people doing this kind of work is living an alternative, in a sense. And so that can be really rewarding and fulfilling too.

You're not thinking that you're necessarily changing the entire structure of what we do with animals, but you are getting to do the opposite on a daily basis and really live that. And I think that's meaningful to people as well.

**Mariann:** Yeah, I love that because when I asked that question before about our vision of how the world should be and should sanctuaries even exist, or should we not be doing any of these things to animals?

And that's always been very important to me. Like even though, as you said, it's not gonna happen in our lifetime, probably, I never like to say definitely, but chances are, and it may never happen. I mean, humans are who humans are. But I still think it's important to have a vision, and that's really important to me to have this idea of what it would be like if we were to succeed. I just need that light at the end of the tunnel.

But what you're saying is that for some people, it's not so much an idea; it's actually people doing the sanctuary work. They want to live that reality, even if it's only in their small microcosm of a world. And I think that's a very beautiful idea. And I always used to feel, when I first got involved with animals, which was a really long time ago, I would go to Farm Sanctuary; that was the only sanctuary I knew of; it just felt like hallowed ground.

It was this safe space in the world where people understood why I felt this way, and I didn't have to think about it. The ground itself becomes somehow different because of the attitudes towards animals that the people hold who are there. So, there's something almost spiritual about it, and I don't get spiritual. *both laugh* I dunno what I'm talking about, but I got off on a spiritual tangent there. So I guess there is a little bit of that.

All right. I want to get to another topic because we want to talk a little bit about effective altruism and its relationship to sanctuaries and the craziness that's going on right now.

But before we did, I just wanted to ask you a little bit about government. This, I guess, applies mostly to dogs and cats, and I feel that there has been a change in the past 50 years or so that government actually has, in some places, not everywhere, government actually has some responsibility towards animals.

It's kind of a new idea that government takes on the responsibility of not just dealing with these animals and getting rid of them and not being cruel to them, but of actually, “We need to build a shelter to find these animals homes.” It's

actually sort of a responsibility. In your ideal world, would caring for animals be a governmental function?

Is that a social, or political, where this should be?

**Elan:** Oh…That's interesting. I hadn't thought about that before. Yes, I think so. But in my ideal world, government would do that for humans in a way that it doesn't either.

**Mariann:** Well, true. That would be the first step. Yeah.

**Elan:** But definitely, to go back to your question about the sort of ideal world, I do think realistically that it's much more likely that we would get to a world in which we are learning to coexist with animals that we actually live with and are around us a lot than we would be in a world where humans are somehow separate from and never interact with other animals. And I think that in a situation like that, if you were sort of to imagine expanding the boundaries of how we care and think about animals in the sanctuary space to an entire city, the government would have to play a role in helping out with those things.

And whether that's providing shelter and care for unhoused animals that need it because they're domesticated species, that can't live well on their own outdoors, or creating spaces that are more hospitable and safer for animals like park designs that create spaces for wildlife to thrive rather than treating them as as sort of pests or whatever.

**Mariann:** Right. And I think sometimes when we talk about, I mean obviously, we do have national parks and environmental laws that can benefit animals, but when they're spoken about from a legal point of view, they're often not focused on saving animals, other than saving species so that people will still have species to view.

There hasn't been that shift so much that they should actually be serving animals. But I wonder if that shift is occurring, and I would certainly like to see it occur. That the government doesn't have a duty to preserve animals so that people can enjoy them but actually has a duty to animals themselves.

I mentioned that we wanted to get to effective altruism because wanted to talk about the book that's coming out that you have a chapter in. We'll get to that in a second, but before I even knew about that or thought about that, I wanted to talk about effective altruism because I think it's such an important question in the sanctuary space. The proponents of effective altruism, which has become the

big money within the animal rights movement, have in the past, and maybe still this is still going on, I would like you to let me know, disdain sanctuaries as kind of a waste of money. Like, with the idea that all they do is save a few animals and we have to save billions, but that's a much more complicated question than that, isn't it?

**Elan:** Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, I addressed this in the book too.

When I first started doing my fieldwork. I remember a report or something came out from Animal Charity Evaluators, which sort of follows an effective altruist approach, saying exactly that. That money would be better off being given to, I think, at the time, everybody was saying that all the money should be going into vegan advocacy because you want to change the system. And so if you can change the system, you have to get consumers to stop doing what they're doing and stop demanding these products. And sanctuaries aren't doing that because they're rescuing, from the perspective of statistics, insignificant amounts of animals. Out of billions killed every year, they're rescuing a tiny, tiny fraction of a percentage. But I think that it's sort of asking the wrong question, or it's assuming the wrong position from the outset, which is if you're going to change what people are doing, there are these certain sorts of hacks that can be done.

For a while, it was only vegan advocacy, and then it became, "Well, let's just develop alternative proteins to replace what they're eating, and we'll do a switcheroo, and then everybody will be not eating animal products anymore, and the industry will go away."

But I think that to get a real change in how people think about animals, it's going to require a lot more than that. And I think that sanctuaries are doing that. And I'm not saying that they're having a massive impact on society and how we think about animals now, but I think that cultural change happens slowly. And I think that something that is sort of impossible to quantify right now is- what is the impact sanctuaries are having on the way people think about animals? And what is the impact they're going to have long term?

But from talking to people who know about sanctuaries, while I was doing the fieldwork, and from the conversations I've had since I wrote my dissertation and turned it into a book and have talked to people about the book, is that just the idea that there are spaces where people want to do this for animals really shifts the way that others see and think about animals from objects for satisfying your needs or desires to beings and subjects who are worthy of care and support, and like we were just saying, even governmental support, for their own right, not because of what they can mean for humans.

And I think that there's this sort of invaluable dimension to what you could call experiments because they're so small, but these sorts of models of living differently and relating differently to animals that shouldn't be discounted as a waste of money or not sufficiently impacting the way that society is treating animals.

It might be the case in the long term, we find out that those are the only kind of projects that were going to have a big impact and that all of the efforts to tweak capitalism to make it a little more humane were just flashes in the pan. I mean, I hope that it's all successful, but I don't think that it makes sense to discount one in favor of the other.

**Mariann:** I totally hear you, and it can be very frustrating when you come across anyone who thinks they have the answer to what has got to be the most complicated problem on the face of the earth. How do we turn this ship around? So yeah, I really appreciate your thoughts on that.

Tell us a little bit about the book that you have a chapter in, I believe, is that right?

**Elan:** Yeah. So the book is called *The Good it Promises, the Harm it Does: Critical Essays on Effective Altruism*, and it's edited by Carol Adams, Alice Crary, and Lori Gruen. It should be coming out from Oxford Press either at the end of January or early in February.

**Mariann:** By the time this airs, it will already be out.

**Elan:** Yeah. It's sort of wild timing because of all this stuff that's been in the news about effective altruism and the Samuel Bankman-Fried crypto scam and things. And he was, ostensibly, putting a lot of that money into effective altruist causes, or at least he was trying to grow it to do that.

But what the book does is, it has a bunch of different chapters from different authors looking at and critiquing this problem that we were just talking about, with one group of people or individuals sort of positioning themselves as the experts on the most efficient use of resources to address problems.

Especially the problems that can raise when the expertise is dubious or the data that it's ostensibly drawing on doesn't really exist very much. So there are a lot of critiques of different aspects. The chapter I have is specifically looking at the alternative protein industry, and how there was this shift, I think, from an insistence that all the money should be going into vegan advocacy to, “Oh,

looks like vegan advocacy isn't working." *Elan laughs* "We're not really growing the number of vegans that much. Maybe what we really need to do is just take the decision out of people's hands and swap out what they're eating with cultured meat," or what are they calling it now? Cultivated meat? Or plant-based alternatives to animal products.

And I don't want to sound like I'm dismissing that stuff as unimportant; I think it might be a necessary component of any kind of shift. So I do think that alternative protein, let's say, as a technology, is important to all of this. But what started happening in the philanthropy space is that effective altruism ideas were influenced through Animal Charity Evaluators, for example, deciding where most of the money was going. And so they were saying, "These are the causes to put it into; this is where it should go." And a lot of that suddenly became, "Well, let's invest in the development of alternative proteins."

But then a big report came out, I forget now. It's like maybe two years ago or a year ago that was showing that it's very unlikely that cultured meat will be competitive in the market with conventional meat sooner than 10 years, probably longer. In the chapter I wrote, I was looking at the fact that if one of the goals of getting rid of animal agriculture is its impact on climate change and the environment and global warming, those 10 years are not 10 years that we really have to spare true.

And so maybe insisting that we put all of that money in this one basket for this technology that's not going to deliver until it might be too late for it to make the difference we want it to make isn't a very good strategic idea, and maybe some of that money should have been going into other efforts to disrupt or counter industrial animal agriculture. And I don't even know what all of those might have been because I think that there was this sort of monopolization of strategy through this particular perspective. So that's the thing that I look at and critique. But the other people who wrote chapters have a lot of different aspects that they look at.

**Mariann:** Sounds fascinating. And I do just want to point out, as I do all the time, that Jasmin and I gave a talk on effective altruism so long ago. We were invited onto this panel at NYU, and the other panelists were Jon Bokman, who was in charge of Animal Charity Evaluators, and Peter Singer. So we got to debate Peter Singer.

I had never heard of effective altruism at this point, but we did point out some of the things that are being said these days, but one of the things we were talking about, which is our thing, is the importance of media and the arts and

other ways of persuading people, which seemed to be totally disdained and continues to be pretty disdained by effective altruism.

So I hope that there is some thought given within those hallowed halls that seem to be very, very sincere in wanting to change the world for animals, but are controlling a lot of the money. And, of course, people get to do with their money what they want to do with their money, but I hope there's a little bit broader thinking about how we're going to turn the ship around because there are many, many aspects to it.

So that is very exciting that that book is already out, and I'd like to talk to you a little bit more about that in our bonus segment because it's such an interesting topic. But before we do, just remind us of the book that we've been talking about most of the time during this interview, which I think came out in 2021, right? Which, seems so long ago now, but really wasn't!

**Elan:** That's right. Everybody who came out with anything during that period of the pandemic just sort of had to say, "Oh, this is not what I imagined it would be like to have a book come out." But yeah, my book is called *Saving Animals: Multispecies Ecologies of Rescue and Care,* from University of Minnesota Press, and it came out in May 2021, I think.

**Mariann:** Fascinating. And I highly recommended it. And thank you so much for joining us today, Elan. It's really been interesting.

**Elan:** Thank you. It's been a real pleasure.