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Animal-rights protests

A beastly business

Peaceful protests against animal testing are on the rise

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A FOG of confusion shrouds British attitudes to animals. For a nation of pet-lovers, Britain has surprisingly few vegetarians—just 3% of the population—a point that Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, a celebrity chef, tried to make on October 11th when he described the distinction between a pet and a farm animal as “cultural” and suggested, to general outrage, that puppies could be reared for meat. Britain’s animal-experimentation laboratories boast higher welfare standards than many of its farms and abattoirs, yet provoke far more anger. That hostility is now being expressed more openly, as moderate protesters discover new causes to champion and reclaim their campaign from extremists.

The number of peaceful protests against institutions that perform research on animals has increased markedly of late (see chart), as memories of the violent attacks on the homes and cars of researchers have faded, according to information supplied by members of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, a lobby group that keeps tabs on such matters. It reckons that many moderate protesters were so appalled at the increasingly abhorrent tactics used by extremists—which culminated in a grave-robbing in 2004—that they abandoned the cause. Only after such attacks had all but halted in

2009 did they return to the barricades.

There is more for them to shout about. Despite a ban on the testing of cosmetics and household products on animals, the number of experiments performed in Britain rose by almost 40% between 2000 and 2010 to 3.7m, mainly because increasing numbers of genetically modified rodents were used. In France just 2.5m experiments were conducted in 2010 and the figure has been stable for many years.

Two aspects of European legislation may push the figure higher still. The REACH directive, an effort to identify whether chemicals that are already used in vast quantities could be toxic to people, requires that their safety be demonstrated scientifically. In some cases only animal tests are deemed sufficient. The European Commission has estimated that 9m animals may be used for such tests; some observers put the figure far higher. Second, changes to the strict laws that require British scientists to consider alternatives to animal tests may be partially relaxed as a result of European reforms. The Home Office is due to respond to a consultation on the subject within the next few weeks.

Emboldened by the rise of the moderates, new campaigns have begun. Animal Aid, for example, is targeting medical-research charities, which it sees as more amenable to influence than the remote laboratories in which the work is done. It plans to step up its protests.

For their part, scientists are beefing up their security on the advice of the police, lest animal-rights extremism return. The last of four people who were convicted of conspiracy to blackmail as part of their effort to intimidate a family who bred guinea pigs at Darley Oaks Farm was released from jail last month. The National Extremism Tactical Co-ordination Unit, which oversaw their arrest, has turned its attention to such matters once again.

Yet direct campaigns to eliminate animal experimentation by targeting institutions that facilitate it have so far relocated rather than removed the practice. In 1997, for example, protesters directed their anger at Consort Kennels, which bred beagles for animal-testing laboratories. It closed, but it sold much of its stock to the laboratory it supplied so that it could breed the animals needed in-house.

Any successful effort to eliminate animal experiments is more likely to come from within laboratories than outside them, argue researchers. Animal testing is expensive and can be of dubious value, and scientists would prefer cheaper and more reliable alternatives. Alas for lab rats everywhere, such alternatives are not yet sufficiently developed for animal experimentation to be relegated to the past.