

Mark Hawthorne, the Vegan Author With a Soft Spot for Rabbits

From [Jordi Casamitjana, VeganFTA](#)

April 2022

Jordi, author of the book “Ethical Vegan”, interviews Mark Hawthorne, the American animal rights author who happens to have a soft spot for rabbits.

I knew that, around 2009 or so, I had bought a practical guide to animal activism that spelt out all the types of activism there are, with very good tips about how to go about them. And when in 2020 I was researching for my book “[Ethical Vegan](#)”, I came across another book on veganism that had the word “ethic” in the title too. However, I had not connected the two. I did not realise they had been written by the same person. Someone whose writing style struck me as very “helpful”. Someone who seems to write to help others, rather than to let his ego expand. To help animals in need, and to help those who want to help animals in need. This person is the American animal rights author [Mark Hawthorne](#).

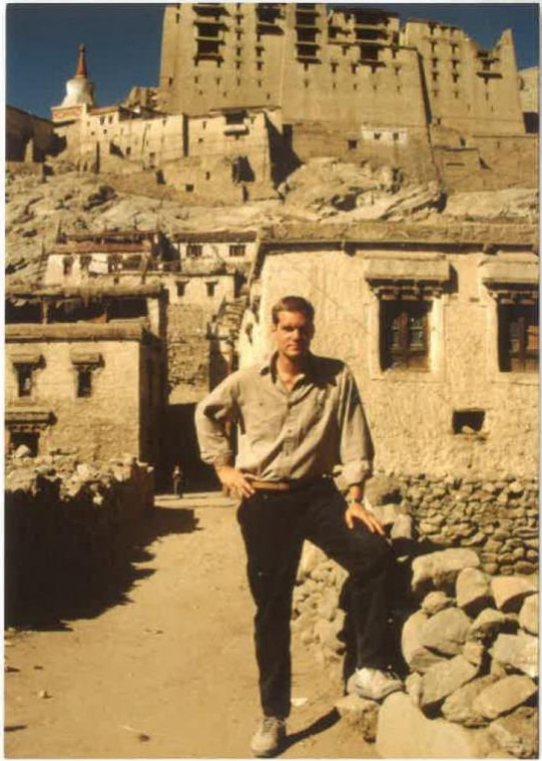
Born in 1962 and growing up in California, Mark has been a prolific writer since 1987. He has published five books on animals and animal rights, and around 100 articles or entries in books and magazines on vegetarianism and animal rights. He is the kind of person I would like to have a chat with about veganism, writing, and what is going on these days in animal advocacy. So, I bought his latest book about rabbits, read it, and asked him if I could interview him for an article.

He said yes, and many more interesting things.

Mark’s Vegan Journey

Like me, Mark has been an ethical vegan for around 20 years, so I was curious to find out how his vegan journey was. Interestingly, it seems that we have many things in common. We are of similar age, and we both started our long vegan journey in the Iberian Peninsula:

“In 1990, when I quit my job, I gave away most of my belongings, I packed a backpack, and I moved to Europe. And I was somebody who grew up as an omnivore. I was raised to eat animals, at least once a day. And at the same time, I thought of myself as a compassionate person. But these travels really changed me. They really helped to formulate who I am. I had a friend who lived in Germany and he said, ‘why don’t you stay with me until you figure out where you want to go, where you want to live. So, I said, ‘that’s great’, and I ended up living in Frankfurt.



Mark Hawthorne in Ladakh, India, Oct 1992

For my 30th birthday — which was actually two years later, in 1992 — I said ‘hey, let’s go to Pamplona, let’s go for the fiesta, let’s [run with the bulls](#).’ I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I just thought it’d be this fun adventure. And so, we took the train down to Pamplona, and we did the run with the bulls. They sprint from the corral where they hold these bulls into the [bullring](#) in the city. I sat in the bullring, watching the other participants from this bull run with some smaller bulls that they let into the bullring — they cap their horns, so they can’t really hurt anybody.

I just felt ashamed. I felt ashamed about what I had participated in. I really regretted what I was doing, and I really cheered for those bulls down there who were throwing participants over their backs. I wish I could say that I went vegan that day, or even vegetarian, but I didn’t. The best I can say is that a seed was planted. It was the first time I can remember where I really considered a life outside of my own. As I said, I thought of myself as a compassionate person, but it wasn’t until I sat there in Pamplona and watched these animals interacting with these humans, and these humans mistreating these animals, that I realised the role that I played in animal exploitation. That was the first instance of my journey.

The next was a couple of months later. I moved to India, and I lived in the Himalayas in Ladakh, which is high in northern India, almost to the border. I lived with a Buddhist family for two months and almost everything I ate came out of their garden — the only exception would be rice. I felt physically, spiritually, and mentally better than I’d ever felt in my life. I don’t think I ever used the word ‘veganism’ in my head — I don’t think I processed it that way — but I was essentially a vegan.

One day, as winter approached, they didn’t have electricity in their house, they dug a big hole in the garden and buried their fruits and vegetables. As you know, there are many cows in India, and there were a couple of cows who lived across the roadway from our house. They let one of these cows come in to nibble on the stalks and stems that remained in the garden.

I stood in the garden with her, and she was about maybe six feet from me. I just watched her, and I was sort of transfixed by her beauty, and by her gentleness. It really hit me that she had as much right and as much desire to live as I did. At that point, realising how good I felt not eating animals, I stopped eating cows. And then I gradually stopped eating chickens, pigs, fishes, and other animals. So, I became a vegetarian.

I got back to the United States. I was doing some writing for various magazines, and one of those magazines was 'Hinduism Today'. They asked me to write an article about the history of vegetarianism. As I was researching that article, I was reading a lot about veganism, like John Robbins' book '[Diet for a New America](#)', and I realised I didn't want to be part of the exploitation of cows and hens. Right around that same time I went to a sanctuary for farmed animals, and I met some of the cows, and some of the hens, who had been rescued from the dairy and the egg industry. I just went vegan that day. That was in September of 2001, and I've been vegan ever since."

Mark's Writing Journey



Mark Hawthorne books

As a vegan, Mark has done many types of activism over the years, but in the animal rights movement, he is better known for his writing than for anything else. So, I wanted to know if the writing came first.

"I had been a writer before I left to live in Europe and India, but my writing changed quite a bit when I got back to the United States. I mentioned that I was living in Ladakh with a Buddhist family. Well, Ladakh is also a location where a lot of people have come over from China, from Tibet. Tibet has been occupied by China since 1950, and there many Tibetan refugees who come over the border into Northern India. And there's a large settlement there in Ladakh, where I met many Tibetan refugees. So, when I got back to the United States as a vegetarian, I started doing work for Tibetan relief organisations. Doing a lot of writing for their newsletters, for example. And then, as I was transitioning into veganism, I started doing writing for magazines like [Satya](#) — which unfortunately is no longer published, but it was a magazine that focused on animal rights and social justice. And I was also writing for [VegNews Magazine](#). Then, around 2007, a publisher in England approached me and asked me if I would like to do a book about animal rights. They said that they had never done any animal rights books but they'd like to do one, and they were familiar with my writing."

This was the first book I mentioned in the introduction: *Striking at the Roots: A Practical Guide to Animal Activism*, a very easy book to read that goes through different types of activism (leafleting, letter writing, tabling, protests, outreach, corporate campaigning, volunteering in sanctuaries, direct action, and lobbying), telling you what they are, what do you need to get, and how to start doing them, all in a simple bullet-point-style for quick learning and reference. Something that I found very useful when I bought it and helped me to expand my activism further. He almost did not write it:

“At first I said no because I didn’t think there was anything I could add to the animal rights literature, but then I remembered how difficult it was for me starting off as an activist who just wanted to do activism on my own. I wasn’t interested in joining a large organisation. I remembered how difficult it was for me to do that, and so, I thought, ‘well, maybe I need to write a book about animal rights activism for everyone if they just want to do it on their own. If they just want to leaflet, for example, or set up a table somewhere, or they even want to do corporate campaigning, or they want to do work in a sanctuary.’ So, that’s when I wrote ‘Striking at the Roots’, which came out in 2008. I really thought that would be the only book I would write.”

But, thankfully, it wasn’t. Mark’s second book was *Bleating Hearts: The Hidden World of Animal Suffering*, a comprehensive hard-hitting examination of the world’s vast exploitation of animals, from the food, fashion, and research industries to the use of other species for sport, war, entertainment, religion, labour and pleasure.

“I started hearing from activists from around the world telling me how they were using the book to help them with forms of exploitation that I really was not familiar with. Like activists in Costa Rica who were using the techniques to advocate for sharks who were killed for the shark finning industry, things like that. And so, I decided I wanted to explore some of these lesser-known forms of exploitation in a larger book. That’s when I wrote ‘Bleeding Hearts’. It’s 650 pages long and it took me five years to write it. It just goes into everything about animals used for food, for clothing, for animal testing, but it even goes into a lot of exploitation that is not well-known, like animals used for ritual sacrifice and religion, for sexual exploitation, etc.”

The book I mentioned earlier that had the word “ethic” in the title is Mark’s third book, *A Vegan Ethic: Embracing a Life of Compassion Toward All*, which I also read and I found myself in agreement with almost everything he discusses in it. Still written in a very helpful and practical way, this book is when Mark’s views about the importance of the intersectional approach in veganism — which match mine — are clearly expressed. He talks about how we must logically extend our circle of compassion to human animals as well. In a way, I feel that he has written his three first books in reverse order, as this one is the most theoretical and philosophical about veganism, the second is about the many ways animals suffer which should make us want to do more than just be vegan and not participate on them, and the first book is what to do as activists if we decide to do more.

“In 2016 I wrote ‘The Vegan Ethic’, which argues that veganism is more than just about the food we eat. There is really a holistic approach that we should be taking. When we’re talking about subjugation and oppression, we should really be including more than just the animals used for food in our advocacy.” He wrote two more books after that, *The Way of the Rabbit* in 2020 (which is also an excellent read with lots of interesting facts about rabbits), and *Eco-Spirituality and Human-Animal Relationships*, to be published this year.

Rabbits Are Really Something



Photo By Victoria Paladiy via Shutterstock (Royalty-free stock photo ID: 1411747946)

I never thought about it, but as Mark explains in his fourth book, rabbits are one of the few species who have been the victims (and still are) of almost all types of exploitation humans have conceived. They are used for food, for their fur, for testing drugs and cosmetics, in cruel sports, in domestication, in entertainment (think magician's top hats), in religious rituals, you name it! And yet, there are so friendly-looking and gentle, that it feels doubly unfair. Mark explains why he decided to write about them:

“A couple of years ago I decided I wanted to write a book about rabbits. I’ve always loved rabbits and I wanted to write a book that celebrates them. We have some people who have written some excellent books about rabbits, but all of these books are about how they’re exploited. So, I wanted to write a book that celebrates them instead. A book that is a joy to read, that is not going to be all about how horrible their lives are. That’s why I wrote ‘The Way of the Rabbit’, because I just wanted a fun book.”

This book will surprise you with interesting facts about rabbits that most likely you would not know. For instance, did you know all the domestic rabbits come from the Iberian Peninsula, where both Mark and I started our vegan journeys? And because of that, the Romans called *Hispania* what is today Spain (which comes from the Carthaginian *Ispania* which means “land of the rabbits”). It also debunks several myths about them, including the commonly held belief that the Easter bunny tradition comes from a mixing of pagan gods (and this bit is probably true) with the Christian fasting in lent, which, according to the legend, allows rabbits to be eaten, and this is why monks domesticated them.

“For many decades the theory in scientific circles of how rabbits came to be domesticated is that French monks were raising them as food because they say that there was this edict from Pope Gregory, centuries ago, saying that it’s okay to eat rabbits during lent when good Catholics are not supposed to be eating animals — well, they’re allowed to eat fish, so I guess that they weren’t considering fishes to be animals. That was the theory.

Well, this turned out to be completely untrue. I believe it was 1936 when somebody in Germany had shared this story in a journal, and it had nothing to do with Pope Gregory. It had to do with a historian named Gregory who was relating a story about rabbits. Somebody who died from eating a rabbit. But somehow, this got picked up and for decades was accepted as absolute fact, as the truth that this is how rabbits came to be domesticated.”

Mark’s connection with rabbits is linked to veganism too, as they, like vegans, also eat a plant-based diet: *“I went vegan in 2001 and I wanted to do more. I wanted to be more involved with the movement, rather than just being vegan. So, I chose rabbits to foster because they are vegans themselves. I’ve always had a fondness for rabbits, even as a child, but there is something about them as vegans that really appeals to me. And they are — some organisations are saying — the third most popular companion animal after dogs and cats. And, of course, most dogs and cats eat animals. That would have been a conflict for me. I think, at that time, it just made perfect sense to foster rabbits. And then, I ended up adopting every rabbit I fostered, because I just love them so much.”*

“We now live with a rabbit in our home because we found a rabbit who had been abandoned on the street. As you know from reading the book, my wife and I had agreed we weren’t going to have any more animals, but we found this rabbit and we brought him home. And we now have adopted him. He is a reminder every day for us to be as good as we can. He is just a perfect being in his own right, but he reminds us that we can do better, that we can be better humans, that we don’t need to eat other animals.”

With their twitching furry noses and their extrovert inquisitive ears, there is something magical about these gentle salad eating long-toothed digging creatures that half hop and double poop (if you got lost in my description, get Mark’s book and you will see) that explains why we invite them into so many of [our stories](#) and superstitions and choose them for so many symbols (from fertility to freedom from cruelty). Mark made me like them more.

The Most Effective Activism

Chatting with someone who has written a book about different types of activism, and considering we are living in an era where the term “effective” has become very important in campaigning — especially when



Mark Hawthorne and Phoenix

attracting funding — I could not resist the temptation to ask Mark which type of activism he thinks is the most effective. He gave me a very diplomatic answer which is difficult to disagree with:

“The answer is more complicated than it might seem because my feeling is that the most effective form of activism is the form that you find the most rewarding — because we need to be in this fight for the long haul. We need to be in this movement our entire lives if we’re fighting for animals, or whatever we are fighting for. So, this advice isn’t just for animal activism. It’s for whatever social justice issue you’re fighting for because it’s so easy to get burned out. I don’t think that we should be spending our time on forms of activism that are not rewarding for us.

For example, if you’re somebody who’s an introvert, if you’re too shy to table or to leaflet, or some other face-to-face type of activism, although I would encourage you to try it just to test your boundaries — because I think we need to push ourselves — I would say that if you find that it’s not rewarding for you, don’t do it. If you’re introverted, you might prefer writing letters to editors. You might write op-ed pieces or write books. I was really more introverted when I started off than I am today, but the whole reason that writing appealed to me is because I’m pretty shy. So, whatever form of activism it is that you find to be the one that makes you feel the best, that’s the most effective form of activism.”

I also asked Mark which of the types of activism he mentions in his books has he tried, and which is his favourite:

“I’m trying to think of one that I didn’t do. I remember, when I was writing, when I was going to write about open rescue, I was going to break into a factory farm and bring out an animal. I remember thinking, ‘if I’m going to write about this, I need to know what it feels like.’ So, I did it. With another activist, I went to a factory farm, and I rescued several chickens. We brought them to a sanctuary for farmed animals and they lived there the rest of their lives. I did make an effort to try every form of activism that I wrote about. I can’t think of off the top of my head if there’s anything I did not do. Well, I haven’t become an animal rights attorney, so other than that, I think I did everything else in my book.

I really like working in sanctuaries. I really like volunteering with the animals. Most activists that I know who have done volunteer work at sanctuaries, find it extremely rewarding because you are actually engaging with the animals who have been rescued from these industries. But I also like tabling a lot. I like talking to people one-on-one. You get some rude people, you get some confrontational people, but ultimately, when it comes down to it, most people can't argue with the fact that these animals are dying and suffering. As I said before, I'm pretty shy, but I do enjoy talking to people, and most people are very open. Especially now, because veganism has become a lot more mainstream, and there's been a lot more in the news about it."

The Problem of Anti-intersectionality



lauren Ornelas and Mark Hawthorne Tabling for FEP

As I normally do when I interview people who have been vegan for a long time, I wanted to pick up Mark's brain regarding some topical vegan issues that I think he may have an interesting opinion about. For instance, the controversial issue of intersectionality, a theoretical framework for understanding how aspects of social and political identities (race, gender, sexuality, class, etc.) might combine to create unique modes of discrimination. It was initially used by [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#), an American civil rights activist, in the context of feminism to highlight how other factors (such as race or sexuality) may intersect with it. But in the context of veganism, it now means fighting both for the rights of marginalised groups of humans and the rights of animals, as these fights intersect through the same exploiters/oppressors. I am in favour of the intersectional approach, and I know that, after his experiences with the work of [prominent intersectional vegans](#) such as Carol J. Adams and Marti Kheel, Mark is also. But it worries me that some vegans have become anti-intersectionals — and [I have written about it](#). I asked Mark what he thinks about them:

“I see it as very short-sighted and very unfortunate. People become so passionate as vegans — and understandably so — that they become so focused on just the animals, believing that they can't speak for themselves, and saying ‘humans can fight for themselves, animals cannot, therefore, I'm going to spend all my time on animal issues, and I don't want to mix the two.’ Some even believe that they only have enough compassion for one issue, which is ridiculous. That's where I think this anti-intersectionality comes from. People get very worked up, rightly so, about animal abuse, and they feel that it's doing a disservice to animals to try to bring in other issues now.

I speak from some personal experience. You may know my wife is [lauren Ornelas](#). She's the founder of [Food Empowerment Project](#), and that's an organisation that I do some work for. In addition to going to protests, and going to conferences, and getting out there in the world interacting with people, I hear a lot about people who get upset because [Food Empowerment Project](#) discusses issues beyond animals. The whole reason that lauren founded this group is because she wanted to address all these issues around food, not just animals, but slavery in the chocolate industry, access to healthy food, farmworker issues, etc.

The reason that I bring this up is that I hear this every day. I hear about activists who are upset because [Food Empowerment Project](#), and by extension myself because I write their newsletter, are addressing issues that are outside animal issues. They even think that people can only work on one thing at a time, and that it takes away from animals, which I argue is ridiculous. I further argue that we need to really look hard at our definition of veganism for the modern world, and say, if we are really working to liberate oppression, to liberate oppressed species, then we need to be including humans in that, not just animals. If we're going to see the liberation of animals, we need to realise that animal abuse, animal exploitation, animal oppression, and human exploitation, human oppression, are so intrinsically linked. We're not going to see the liberation of animals unless we also see the liberation of humans.”

Social Media in Animal Activism

In 2007, when Mark wrote *Striking at the Roots*, [social media](#) was already out there, but not as developed as it is today. If he had to write the book today, he told me that he would have a bigger chapter about it.



Mark Hawthorne in SixFlags protest

“I have two things to say at least about social media. The first I will say is that I think it’s had a very positive impact on animal activism and by extension animals. One example is how the documentary [Blackfish](#) was shared through social media and became so popular. It has had such an impact on people. I don’t know that we would have had the result that we had with it, at least in the United States, with whales in captivity being protected, if it hadn’t been for [Blackfish](#). And if it hadn’t been for how [Blackfish](#) was made popular through social media. You had famous people in entertainment using their social media as a platform, to share this knowledge, to ask people to watch [Blackfish](#), which was available for free, I believe. We have [Tick Tock](#) now, we have so many other things, so many other ways for people to connect with other activists, arrange for protests, or share petitions. Social media has now a very powerful consequence, a very powerful impact.

The other thing that I want to be sure that I mention is that, because social media is so powerful, it also has the ability to suck us in, and to drain our energy — almost to drain our soul. [Social media](#) can be very toxic. There is a lot of hatred on social media. We need to be, as activists, very careful about how much time we spend on social media. I advocate a number of ways to not get burned out as an activist and not to suffer from compassion fatigue, and one of those ways is to take a break from social media. So, as much as I think social media is a very important tool, especially in an age we are living in now where we can’t get out necessarily and meet face to face with people, I think that we need to be aware of how much time we’re spending on it, and how toxic it can be.

We need to be able to take a break. That might mean something as simple as shutting off your phone one day a week. Or it could mean taking a month’s break from Facebook, or something like that. But we need

time to recharge our batteries. We need time to get outside in a safe environment and to interact with people in a way that's positive. Unfortunately, social media doesn't always allow us to do that."

My conversation with Mark was very pleasant because he seems a very kind man. Someone with the soft soul of a gentle rabbit. And the fact that he and Lauren have been able to build their lives around helping others in need, regardless of which species they belong to, must be contributing to this glowing kindness perceivable even across thousands of miles — thanks to Zoom. Despite his success as a writer, I don't see an inflated ego, I see a growing sense of service to help others, to do good to anyone.

This generosity of spirit was even present when we were saying our goodbyes, as he asked me to ensure that, somewhere in my article, I should ask people not to give rabbits as presents during Easter, as is traditional. He said *"It's very popular in the United States and I think in England also. These rabbits, ducks, and chickens mostly, don't survive afterwards. Rabbits don't survive more than a year because they end up being abandoned in parks or at shelters."*

So, here you have it: **Please don't give rabbits as presents on Easter.** In fact, please don't give any animal as a present at any time, because they are not "property" for you to give, and if you treat them as objects, people whom you give them to will treat them as objects too (and forget about them as one forgets about a surplus toaster). We, vegans, know that, but it's always good to keep repeating it — in case some carnist is listening.

Shaken up by some running bulls, waken up by a nibbling cow, and seduced by many lost rabbits, Mark's innate shyness has now flourished into a loud voice for compassion without boundaries that I hope keeps spreading all over the world.

I am looking forward to reading his next book.