

Special report: GRACE campaigns against modern agriculture

Summary

In 2003, the Global Resource Action Center for the Environment (GRACE) issued a press release announcing “The Meatrix,” a flash animation film that purported to bring the “truth” about factory farming to light. This “truth” misrepresented modern-day agriculture in regards to animal health and wellbeing, human health, food safety and the environment.

Although GRACE would like everyone to think it is simply another under-funded non-profit organization, this well-connected activist group is using its multi-million dollar budget to pursue multiple campaigns that attack conventional livestock production, including the Meatrix sequel that will focus on the dairy industry.

Background

GRACE tries concealing Meatrix funding

When the Meatrix was first released, GRACE attributed the film’s funding to winning “the first-ever flash activism grant” hosted by Free Range Graphics, a design firm serving non-profit advocacy groups. However, Free Range Graphics describes the birth of ‘The Meatrix’ a bit differently. In an interview with the Kellogg Foundations’ *Food and Society Update* e-newsletter in May 2005, Tate Hausman, one of the Meatrix creators, said that Free Range “decides we want to take on an issue, and we bring together a coalition of partners to help us. That was the case with ‘The Meatrix,’ when we decided that we wanted to tackle factory farming, and we brought together Global Resource Action Center for the Environment (GRACE), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Farm Sanctuary, and a couple other groups.”

“The Meatrix” has been enormously successful online, with GRACE boasting that it has now been viewed more than 10 million times. And as the International Foundation for the Conservation of Natural Resources posts on its Web site, the target audience is not today’s grocery shoppers but tomorrow’s:

“Animal rights and environmental activists have long targeted children and schools for their life-style manipulations. Given the ‘credibility’ of well-funded foundations and connections built through the years from endowing academic institutions, NGOs [non-governmental organizations] like G.R.A.C.E. are making in-roads that undermine basic parental values in their

efforts to huckster views lauding vegetarianism and anti-capitalism while condemning medical research, farming, meat raising and consumption, the use of leather or fur, commercial and recreational fishing, aquaculture, biotechnology in its many applications, the use of animals as pets and in entertainment, equestrian endeavors, hunting, trapping, etc.”

In fact, GRACE recently awarded \$1,000 in school supplies to two teachers who devised the best curriculum program based on “The Meatrix.”

Well-funded and opposed to modern agriculture

GRACE is funded at more than \$2 million a year by its founder and principal Helaine Heilbrunn Lerner, who has contributed nearly \$9 million to the organization since 2000. She can well afford it; her Tamarind Fund (formerly the Helaine Heilbrunn Lerner Fund) rings up at \$66 million.

The projects pursued by GRACE provide further insight into the organization’s agenda. Sustainable Table, for example, is a consumer campaign developed by GRACE to “help fill in the gaps in the sustainable food movement, and to help direct consumers to the leading organizations who are working on the issue.” “The Meatrix” and the Eat Well Guide (www.eatwellguide.com) were the first two projects for the Sustainable Table campaign and they were launched along with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

Both projects denigrate conventional or modern-day livestock production on the basis of food safety, health, animal welfare and environment claims and assert the solution is for consumers to purchase all of their meat from small, local producers. GRACE describes The Eat Well Guide as an “online directory of sustainably-raised meat, poultry, dairy and eggs. Consumers simply put in their zip code to find sustainable products from farms, stores, and restaurants in their area.”

The GRACE Factory Farm Project (GFFP online at www.factoryfarm.org) is a sister project of Sustainable Table. This project is headed by an economist and, according to GRACE, consists of a group of farmer-consultants who have all confronted factory farms and “become experts on the subject.” When invited, GFFP works with local communities around the country and in Canada to prevent new “factory farms” from being developed and to hold existing ones accountable for perceived violations.

Extending the agenda to academia

The GRACE Factory Farm Project also works with the Center for a Livable Future at the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health. This partnership is formalized through the Henry Spira/GRACE Project on Industrial Animal Production, which was created to promote “research on industrial animal production and address its impact on diet, the environment, and on human and animal health.”

The Johns Hopkins’ Center for a Livable Future also directly benefits from Helaine Lerner’s misguided generosity, and in November 2002, launched the “Meatless Monday” campaign. According to the Center, the project was designed to “encourage Americans to abstain from all meat at least one day per week,” ostensibly to promote “healthy dietary alternatives.” And, presumably, to advance Helaine Lerner’s agenda. The Meatless Monday Web site (www.meatlessmonday.com) is host to meat-free recipes, questionable health and nutrition information and tools for extending the campaign, which purports to “help Americans prevent heart disease, stroke, diabetes and cancer – four of the leading causes of death in America.”

According to ActivistCash.com, a site created by the Center for Consumer Freedom to expose the motives of activist groups, writes that in 2001, Lerner-sponsored funds “jointly gave \$900,000 to another Johns Hopkins program – this one tied to the \$100-million Humane Society of the United States – for an animal-rights program targeting lifesaving medical research protocols that use animals,” the Center for Alternatives to Animal Testing.

Capitalizing on success of “The Meatrix”

Now GRACE is aggressively promoting its newest project, “The Meatrix II: Revolting,” which takes place on a dairy farm and is scheduled for release in March (www.themeatrix2.com). Marketing efforts for the new short film so far have included blogging and social networking, tactics popular with the film’s youthful target audience. The blog (www.themeatrix.com/blog/), written by Meatrix Executive Producer and GRACE Marketing Director Diane Hatz, reveals that this time around, GRACE has teamed up with a Public Citizen spin-off group, Food and Water Watch, and hired a Washington, D.C. public relations firm that also represents Farm Aid and the Environmental Defense Fund to promote the film.

The “My Space” account of the film’s Moopheus character (www.myspace.com/moopheus) includes a profile of the character, his likes and dislikes and a promise that in the new film, “he and his co-stars will again fight against the Meatrix,” but this time there will be a catch, “something that leaves you on the edge of your seat.”

The film’s trailer, released Jan. 17, offered no insight into the plot or the catch, but one thing is for sure...unlike in the real “Matrix II: Revolutions,” there will be no moment of truth from GRACE or “The Meatrix II.”

Key Points

- Following the success of “The Meatrix,” film creators are planning a sequel that is scheduled for release in March 2006 and will focus on dairy production. The Global Resource Action Center for the Environment (GRACE) is behind the films.
- GRACE is already aggressively promoting “The Meatrix II: Revolting” by using Web-based outlets that are popular with the youthful target audience for the film and enlisting the services of a well-known public relations firm that represents other advocacy groups as well.
- Additional GRACE projects include the Sustainable Table, Eat Well Guide, Factory Farm Project and the Meatless Monday campaign, which is conducted in partnership with the Center for a Livable Future at Johns Hopkins University.
- Though GRACE would like the public to believe it is just another under-funded non-profit organization, the organization has received nearly \$9 million in support from its benefactor Helaine Heilbrunn Lerner since 2000.
- The Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health not only benefits from partnering with GRACE on projects, but also has received funding from Lerner in connection with a Humane Society of the United States campaign against potentially life-saving medical research that involves animals.
- GRACE is connected to well-known activist groups like Public Citizen, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and Farm Sanctuary. However, the organization’s influence is expanding to include academia, grade schools and eventually, more main-stream consumers.