

How does producing advocacy research affect the animal advocacy movement?

Maria Salazar, Manja Gärtner, Greg Boese | Animal Charity Evaluators | August 2021

Abstract

There are no peer-reviewed publications about the effects of producing advocacy research—research that contributes to an understanding of effectively helping animals—in the animal advocacy movement. Despite this absence, there is reason to believe that producing relevant research can affect the animal advocacy movement in different ways. Advocacy research can impact the priorities set by animal advocates in regard to focus areas, methods, and regions. It can also inform the implementation of interventions by providing knowledge that can help advocates do their daily work. Long term, conducting animal advocacy research could grow research fields and increase support from academics and other researchers, as well as members of the public and other social sectors. The formalization of fields in academia could provide information and ideas that could be more useful for future animal advocates, researchers, and decision-makers.



Our assessment

We believe that conducting advocacy research is a generally promising intervention, especially when considering its potential effects in the longer term (defined as more than one year). Due to the lack of research about the extent to which animal advocacy research results are actually used by the movement to prioritize and implement their work, our confidence in the short-term effects of this intervention is low. Also, we acknowledge that we may be generally biased to favor this intervention because part of our work consists of conducting and supporting relevant research.

Influencing priorities

Research results can influence how animal advocates prioritize interventions and actions—especially those relating to focus areas, methods, and regions of operation.

For example, the prioritization of farmed animal welfare over other animal-related cause areas has been informed, at least to some extent, by research on (i) animal behavior and welfare, (ii) the number of animals used for different purposes, and (iii) the distribution of resources allocated to each cause area.¹ On the basis of similar evidence, some advocates have prioritized work targeting farmed chickens and fishes over other farmed mammals.²

The consideration of wild animal welfare as an important cause area by some charities and individuals is another example of the impact of research on animal advocacy priorities. Preliminary research on the number of animals living in the wild and their quality of life has been used by advocates to focus on this cause area.³

Research on the impacts of specific interventions can inform advocates' decisions about which methods to use. For example, research on the short-term effects of different campaigns to help farmed animals may have influenced some animal advocates to prioritize corporate outreach campaigns.⁴

¹ [Broad \(2017\)](#)

² See, for example, [Beggs \(2020\)](#).

³ See, for example, [Tomasik \(2015\)](#).

⁴ [Piper \(2019\)](#)

Geographic or regional data can also be used to prioritize advocacy initiatives. Advocates may choose to concentrate their work in an area with strong animal protection laws and policy commitments, or they may decide to intervene in a country with significant room for improvement. Information on various socio-economic factors across countries and regions ultimately may help guide global prioritization.⁵

Potential limitations of conducting advocacy research projects of this type include researchers' (i) measurability bias, which might lead them to prioritize projects with easily measured short-term results,⁶ and (ii) confirmation bias, which might lead them to research interventions they already think are effective.

Informing the implementation of interventions

Although we are not aware of any empirical studies on advocacy research, we believe that conducting research relevant to helping animals produces knowledge that could be used by the animal advocacy community to inform the implementation of their work.

For example, research on animal welfare can inform advocates about the quality of life of farmed animals and ways to improve their welfare status.⁷ This knowledge can be used to inform interventions aimed at increasing the welfare standards for farmed animals, such as corporate asks or policy and legislative campaigns to achieve welfare regulations in public policy and law.

Research on alternatives to animal products can also be used by advocates working on transforming the food industry. For example, market research on plant-based products⁸ and research on consumer preferences⁹ can inform charities' work engaging food businesses and consumers.

One potential limitation of conducting research projects of this type is how challenging it is for advocates to navigate mixed research findings, especially in areas where studies depend heavily on the context and audience.

⁵ See, for example, [WAP's Animal Protection Index](#) and [MFA's FAOI](#).

⁶ [Broad \(2018\)](#)

⁷ [Mellor et al. \(2009\)](#)

⁸ See, for example, [GFI's 2019 U.S. State of the Industry Report](#).

⁹ See, for example, [Onwezen et al. \(2021\)](#), [Sanchez-Sabate & Sabate \(2019\)](#), [Weinrich \(2019\)](#), [Bianchi et al. \(2018\)](#), [Bryant & Barnett \(2018\)](#).

Building the field

Producing research relevant for helping animals more effectively can promote the genesis of research fields and subfields. Engaging in interdisciplinary research is one method of growing fields that have the potential to become independent disciplines with unique theoretical and methodological frameworks.¹⁰ Long term, research fields can grow and be formalized through the creation of academic courses, events, and journals. A topic relevant to animal advocacy could gain enough support and reputation to be recognized by the academic community as an independent sub-discipline or discipline.

For example, due to research conducted by the environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s, climate change was identified as an important social problem.¹¹ Further concern and research about the complex problem of climate change contributed to building the interdisciplinary field of climate justice. Counterfactually, it seems that without the research completed by environmental groups, it is less likely that the field of climate justice would have emerged.

An example of a new field proposed by some advocates and researchers is “welfare biology”, research aimed at understanding the welfare of wild animals and the best ways to improve their welfare status.¹² Publishing more research focused on understanding and helping wild animals will contribute to strengthening our current understanding of wild animal suffering, while also building welfare biology into a unique research sub-field.

Generalizability

We think advocacy research is an intervention with particularly high variance when it comes to having an impact. We think that some research projects can be far more influential than others, and researchers’ rigor seems to be a key factor for their impact. However, we believe that the effects in the longer term of advocacy research projects are generalizable in terms of their

¹⁰ [Burggren et al. \(2017\)](#)

¹¹ [Jamison \(2010\)](#)

¹² [Ng \(1995\)](#)

potential to contribute at least to some extent to the accumulation of knowledge and field building.

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