

The War on Animal Research



What it's like to be hounded by activists who will stop at nothing to stop your research.

By P. Michael Conn
Photographs by Bill Cramer

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"Excuse me," I said, cutting to the front of the line of passengers at the airport departure gate counter. "I have an emergency and need you to call the police right now!" Two airline agents stopped checking seating charts and looked at me. "I am a medical researcher and some people are protesting my visit to Tampa. They're not passengers," I explained. (This was in 2001, shortly before 9/11, when security measures allowed nonpassengers into boarding areas.)

One desk agent examined my boarding pass, and then looked at my pursuers. I knew what she saw: five people with T-shirts that read: "KEEP PRIMATE TESTER Dr. P.M. CONN OUT OF U.S.F." She let me through. Ten minutes later, when the pilot boarded and asked if I was okay, and I heard the outer doors close, my blood pressure and heart rate slowly began to sink into normal ranges.



I was en route from Tampa where I had been selected as a final candidate for the position of vice president for research at the University of South Florida (USF). The people following me were animal rights activists, who had learned of my visit on an animal rights listserv.

I currently don't use animals in my research, but I am associated with people who do. I was special assistant to the president of Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU), and associate director of one of its Institutes, the Oregon National Primate Research Center (ONPRC). I also have a research program that has contributed to the development of treatments for breast and prostate cancer, endometriosis, and problems of infertility. ^{1,2} I believe in the value of animal research in basic science. I have spoken and written about the importance of humane animal research and how it benefits both humans and animals.

Because of my position at the OHSU primate center, an animal rights activist had urged subscribers to an animal rights listserv to write letters to the University of South Florida administration and to my academic colleagues, protesting my candidacy. In Tampa, my plane was met by animal extremists who tried to engage and film me. Exercising their rights under a state open-meetings law, they were present at most of my scheduled meetings with university committees. Some stood outside meeting room doors to berate attendees and distribute fliers that made outlandish claims. At the end of the first day, I considered returning home to Portland for my safety, then decided to

remain in this stressful situation for one more day. The university assigned an armed police officer to look after me. I received threatening calls at my hotel and knocks on the door in the middle of the night.

As the demonstrators hoped, drawing this much media attention suggested that I or my research program would be a liability. Needless to say, I didn't get the job.

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What word other than "war" can we employ to describe what is happening to the enterprise of biomedical research? Attack? Assault? How else to describe the posting of pictures of researchers and inaccurate, inflammatory descriptions of their work on the Internet? What do we call the nighttime "visits" to our homes, the mailing of letters to scientists in envelopes armed with razor blades, and Internet postings that reveal an eerie and threatening knowledge of our personal lives and loved ones?



Some argue that animal extremists are a handful, at most. Scientists should ignore them, they say, and concentrate on their research. But consider this: All of the drama surrounding my trip to Tampa was achieved by, at most, 15 poorly informed and inarticulate people who successfully stirred up fear among the search committee, which had been highly supportive of me at first. A small group of extremists are more successful than their moderate colleagues in drawing public attention to their cause, and can exercise an influence wholly disproportionate to their numbers. They are chillingly effective in causing casualties, whether institutional or personal.

The metaphor of war can be self-defeating. We are confident that in any open and civilized public-policy debate, scientists, even though they tend to be poor communicators, would prevail over their challengers. But what will happen if researchers, convinced that they are encircled by belligerents, retreat behind barricades and remain incommunicado? Research and its beneficiaries - that is, all of us - stand to lose.



I never predicted that I would find myself, at age 50, a target of the animal rights community. I have been interested in the biological process of life as long as I can remember. By the time I was 12, I realized that cures for diseases required understanding how the body works when it is healthy. Even before that, I was a biology geek, crawling around on the ground to watch ants, and growing seeds under different colors of plastic film.

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I had read a little bit about animal rights activities when I was in high school in the late 1960s. It was never front-page news, mostly distant and abstract grumblings from "antivivisection" groups in the UK. When I went to college at the University of Michigan, activism was directed towards ending the Vietnam War. I watched people of conscience, including a roommate, get arrested for demonstrating their views.

I never trained to go into primate research and, frankly, knew little about nonhuman primates until I came to Oregon in 1993. I spent the first part of my career at Duke University, working on rat-derived cell cultures. We used white rats and a handful of mice, all of them raised for the laboratory. We caused them no pain and killed them humanely to study their tissues. Six years later, when I became a department head at the University of Iowa College of Medicine, I made the transition to continuous cell-culture lines.^{3,4}

ONPRC, one of eight federally sponsored primate research centers, is a fully accredited institution that is responsible for the care of more than 3,500 monkeys. This is a serious responsibility that involves frequent, unannounced inspection visits by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). We support our animals with a veterinary and animal-care staff of 90 people, along with a separate psychological enrichment program that includes seven more

people led by a doctoral level researcher. We also participate in a voluntary inspection program by an international professional organization, the Association for the Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care (AAALAC). We are fully accredited by that program as well.

The envelope blades, armed with rat poison, were placed so that opening the letter would result in a severe cut.

But that wasn't enough to satisfy the activists who set out to sabotage my trip to the University of Southern Florida. Several things struck me about this experience. For one, the communication among animal extremists was fast, and effective. I was also shocked by the accusations. These people charged me with "crimes" that I had never committed: torturing marmosets and obtaining huge quantities of monkey sperm by a process that they likened to genital electrocution. When I tried to tell them I didn't use sperm and my studies were all done in cell cultures, they shouted me down.

Some investigators at our center and elsewhere routinely collect monkey sperm by a process called electroejaculation. The USDA and the veterinary community approve this process, which isn't painful (despite its unfortunate name). A similar process is used for human paraplegics, otherwise unable to father children. In terms of torturing marmosets, 16 years ago, I collaborated with a British colleague in measuring hormone levels in some marmosets. For that contribution my name was added (as a middle author) to the scientific publication's author list. I had never seen the animals, since the serum was shipped to me on dry ice from England. ⁵



Courtesy of P. Michael Conn

Scenes of vandalism by animal rights activists against other researchers in Portland (not Conn).

The accusations lacked any basis in fact, and people who should have known better - the search committee, for example - accepted them as truth. The president of the university, who had disclosed to me the ironic detail that she had grown up in a family of meat packers, and who had been gracious and supportive during the interview process, refused to speak with me further afterwards. The extremists, of course, took credit. The university eventually filled the position with an animal researcher who works on a rat model of hypertension, but who isn't associated with a primate center and thus wasn't in the crosshairs.



I moved to Portland in 1993. At the time, I was unaware that the area is an incubator for the animal rights movement, which I considered distant and irrelevant, much as I had in high school. On May 3, 1996, that began to change.

That day, I arrived at work early in the morning to find two cars blocking the only entrance to our primate center. The drivers had fastened their necks to the steering column of each car using bicycle locks, and the keys to the cars and the locks were "lost." After firefighters sawed off the steering columns, found the keys, liberated the drivers, and towed the

cars, ONPRC officials signed complaints for second-degree criminal trespass against Craig Rosebraugh and his associates, who identified themselves as members of the Liberation Collective.



Ineffective though it was, this event kindled my interest in the animal rights movement. In 1994, the primate center was approaching its 35th year of uninterrupted compliance with federal regulations for animal care. Nevertheless, we were being targeted by activists. I began monitoring animal rights Web sites, following their listservs, and gathering information from a handful of proresearch organizations operating on shoestring budgets, which provided e-mail summaries of animal rights activities.

One morning in October 1999, I saw a startling message on one of the listservs: A group calling itself the Justice Department said it had sent razor blades to about 80 animal researchers. The blades had been fastened near the top of each envelope so that opening them by inserting a thumb under the flap would result in a severe cut. The blades, the letter announced, had been armed with rat poison. The enclosed letter called on scientists to abandon their research within 12 months or "your violence will be turned back upon you."

I found four primate center investigators on the list of recipients. Being an early riser, I was able to warn them, and we recovered all four envelopes, unopened. These were transferred to law enforcement authorities, but to this day we have heard nothing about them. The 12-month deadline to abandon research programs came and went, without incident.

In recent years, I personally got to know some of the movement's most infamous members.

Craig Rosebraugh - I met Rosebraugh for the first time when his neck was attached to a steering wheel at the entrance to the primate center. In recent years, Rosebraugh ran the press office of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF). He told mainstream media when seemingly random fires or other destructive acts were the result of the movement. He claimed to be uninvolved, and provided no names: Members of the ELF, and its sister group, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), don't carry identification cards or have meetings. No one knows who all the members are.

The FBI, armed with search warrants, had seen fit on two occasions to search Rosebraugh's home. On the first occasion, agents discovered a purple index card, duly reported in the local newspaper, containing my name and home address. Why this card was in his house, or what it might have portended, remains a mystery to this day. You can be assured that when I learned of the discovery, I felt not just the threat of violence, but something more: a violation of my person.

When subpoenaed to testify before Congress in February 2002 as part of an ecoterror investigation led by Senator James Inhofe, Rosebraugh answered only a portion of questions, but some caught my attention.

Q:*Do you know who Michael Conn is?*

A:*Michael Conn is a researcher at the ONPRC in Beaverton (OR). Conn wastes hundreds of thousands of federal tax dollars torturing and killing monkeys, a practice which has in no way benefited human health.*

Q: Why was there an index card with Mr. Conn's name and home address in your residence? Was either ELF or ALF planning to take 'direct action' against Mr. Conn or his property? If not, why was Mr. Conn's name and address in your possession?

A: See all objections, rights, and privileges asserted.

In all, Rosebraugh took the Fifth Amendment more than 50 times.

In October 2003, he announced and promoted his new, self-published manifesto, *The Logic of Political Violence*. The cover features an image of the burning World Trade Center towers, and the book contains this message: "Attack the financial centers of the country ... This can be done in a variety of ways from massive property destruction, to online sabotage, to physical occupation of buildings."

Matt Rossell - Matt Rossell is very good with people. He is clean and well groomed, and seems honest - in all, the kind of person that you might like your daughter to marry. All of this led us to hire him as an animal technician in 1998.

Rossell's subterfuge was so effective that when the local chapter of the Animal Legal Defense Fund announced a press conference to expose allegations (including videos) from a whistleblower about animal abuse at the primate center, we had no idea who the whistleblower might be. Even after we learned it was Rossell, we did not realize that he had been working at our facility as an informant.

Dealing with the public relations nightmare created by Rossell's video images was extremely difficult, to say the least. One of the videos showed a "hungry and filthy" monkey in an incubator. In reality, the infant had been given human baby food and had, like human babies, played with it and smeared the puree on the incubator window. The video had been made at an opportune moment before daily cleanup. From this same video clip came a still photo, frozen at the instant when the infant face looks anguished. This was puzzling until we went back to the video and noticed a rubber-gloved finger moving over the window of the incubator and toward the monkey. In expectation of food, the monkey moves toward the finger, pursing its lips and producing, for less than a second, the look that Rossell reduced to a still. The monkey was not upset or in pain, just caught in an unflattering pose.

Other images presented frightened animals living in what looks like crowded conditions and in the midst of feces covering the floor. The images were created before morning cleanup, so some of the material is likely feces, but most is Purina Monkey Chow biscuits photographed from a distance in the dim light of dawn before morning cleanup. The photographer, having entered their enclosure, had likely frightened the monkeys, causing them to huddle together and appear hemmed in.

Another clip showed a room of monkeys banging their cages. But, in this instance, Rossell's cropping wasn't careful enough: At the bottom right of the video image we can see the food cart, and any animal technician will tell you that monkeys bang their cages in excitement when they see food coming.

The center launched an Internet site to explain the truth behind each of Rossell's images. None of his allegations were supported by extensive federal investigations. Five federal investigators, all veterinarians, worked daily for two weeks but found no merit in Rossell's claims and found no signs of animal cruelty or federal noncompliance. Animal abuse would have been impossible to hide in this investigation or in the 10 unannounced inspections that extended our continuous USDA certification to over 40 years in a row. The primate center was cleared of any wrongdoing. But Rossell has used his images to elicit contributions to the California nonprofit In Defense of Animals, and Web sites and brochures continue to display the images.



No one could wish for new plagues to bring home to the public the need for animal research and put animal extremism to rest. Yet, with global warming, jet travel, avian flu, and AIDS, as well as threats of bioterrorism, diseases once unknown or thought to be conquered are arriving on our doorstep. It may be that exotic and resurgent viruses will swing public opinion in favor of animal research. Medical schools, scientific societies, physician organizations, and research institutions must get out and explain the connection between animal research and human and animal health. We cannot afford to keep it a dirty little secret.