



Libel And How To Avoid It

In recent years, the animal rights movement has found itself under threat of different types of legal proceedings. Among the hazards, are those presented by the laws of libel.

Libel/Slander

In simple terms, a libel is a 'published' statement that a court rules is damaging to the reputation of another. A slander is a damaging statement that is spoken in the hearing of others rather than being published. The production and circulation of campaign journals, leaflets and other materials count as publishing, as do statements made on television, radio and in newspapers. A person complaining of a libel or slander usually talks in terms of their reduced reputation within a community and damage to their career or business.

Attacking Individuals Or Companies

When writing or publicly speaking about actual companies or individuals, don't stray outside what you know – and can prove – to be true and reasonable. For example, although we might be convinced a person doing animal experiments is callous, has no feelings whatsoever for the animals and is interested only in money and career advancement, it could be an impossible task to demonstrate clearly before a jury that such statements are true and fair.

The thing to remember about libel or slander is that you can state a hundred provable facts and make any number of strong supporting comments ('this person clearly has a poor record of animal husbandry and should never again be permitted any contact with animals') but you only have to get one fact wrong and it is that error which will get you into trouble.

Attacking More General Targets

Criticising animal experimentation in general or, for instance, the sheep trade leaves you far more scope, because there is no one individual likely to jump up and claim they have been injured. Although, here again, it makes no sense to exaggerate or make unsupportable statements, given that our unadorned case is so strong.

Speaking/Writing As An Animal Aid Representative

Often we will come to you and seek your support for particular initiatives (Primate Action Day, Horse Racing Awareness Week). Other times you will initiate something yourself and speak to the regional media or sign a letter to your local newspaper as an Animal Aid representative.

We naturally welcome your representation but – to repeat – we would urge caution where specific individuals or companies are named.

For the future, we'd ask that we see – ahead of circulation – any press release or leaflets that are attributed in any way to Animal Aid. Ideally, we would also like to see copies of letters you plan to send, ahead of time. This refers only to those where you sign yourself as an Animal Aid representative or contact, or some equivalent title. If you can email these to the office, you will get a rapid response.

If an individual or company do decide that they have been defamed by an Animal Aid contact then it is both that contact and Animal Aid the organisation (if the plaintiff can successfully argue that the contact was speaking in an official Animal Aid capacity) who will have to defend the suit, and face possible damages and costs.

Don't Be Put Off

This factsheet is all about urging sensible caution and the necessity of being able to prove any damaging statement made about our opponents. It is not intended to discourage campaigners from speaking out, or taking part in protests.

We are not only compelled by the suffering all around us to push on as strongly as ever, it is our democratic right – and, also, our democratic duty to work for a better world. But for all our sakes (Animal Aid doesn't want to hand over its assets to an animal abuser through a moment of carelessness, and nor do local groups) we must be careful.

For any further questions or comments please contact the Campaigns Team at the office.