



Striking at the Roots

Animal activism around the world

Richard Couto Targets Horse Killers

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It would be difficult to imagine a more nightmarish end to any life than what is doled out to animals in slaughterhouses: the smell of death; the sense of impending violence; the unrelenting speed with which workers must stun, kill, and transform one animal after another into products. Even the most graphic video scenes captured by undercover activists are generally recorded within abattoirs that are licensed by the government and subject to some form of oversight requiring that animals be killed humanely. "Killed humanely" may be the biggest oxymoron since "civil war," but at least the executioners in regulated packing plants are answerable to agencies such as the USDA.

And while slaughterhouses are heinous enough, unlicensed slaughter operations subject animals to even more extreme cruelty. Here animals are lucky if they meet their end with a well-aimed bullet. In an unincorporated neighborhood of South Florida's Miami-Dade County known as the C-9 Basin, illegal slaughterhouses are so ubiquitous that they've become a cottage industry, even supplying customers with horse meat, which is a favorite with Miami-Dade's large Cuban population. The local love of horse flesh has fueled not only the illicit-slaughter trade but more than 20 gruesome horse killings in the area during 2009; the perpetrators of these crimes are so brazen that they've broken into private property and butchered horses right in their stalls.



Richard "Kudo" Couto

When he learned about the illegal slaughterhouses 18 months ago, Richard "Kudo" Couto decided to do something about them. Kudo was a volunteer with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in South Florida when he accompanied an SPCA investigator on a call about a horse in distress. "Upon arrival we found the most disgusting property that I've ever been to," he says. "The Miami-Dade police were there, and there were a lot of neglected horses, but there was one horse in real distress. It turned out he was a former race horse who'd broken his leg on the track. His name was Freedom's Flight."

Freedom's Flight, a descendant of Seattle Slew and Secretariat, was tied to a tree, awaiting slaughter. The horse's ribs and other bones were protruding from his coat. Speaking with the police, Kudo learned the farm they were on slaughtered animals. "The property was so dirty that I was surprised it was licensed by the USDA," he says. "After a couple weeks I started to do some investigating, and it turned out that it was an *illegal* slaughter farm. I started doing a little more investigating and I found out that there are *hundreds* of illegal slaughter farms in Miami."

Kudo adopted Freedom's Flight, who has fully recovered, and began a one-man crusade to shut down the illegal slaughterhouses in the C-9 Basin. "At that time, the main thing for me was illegal horse slaughter. I had a handful of friends who'd had their horses slaughtered — people breaking into their barns and killing their beloved pets and harvesting the meat. After a little more investigation I found out that there's a *monstrous* black market for horse meat in Miami-Dade County. I found out that every law enforcement agency in South Florida — mainly the Miami-Dade Police Department — was trying to sweep this under the carpet. They didn't want to deal with it, they didn't want the headaches, and they did not want to investigate any of the crimes. So after they basically laughed at me, my only option was to go to the press."

The media, especially [CNN](#), has been only too happy to report on Kudo's efforts, putting the horse killings and illegal slaughterhouses in the spotlight. "After the public here found out about the illegal horse slaughter, there was an uproar of concern from people," says Kudo. "The Miami-Dade police were basically forced into investigating this. Since then we've made five arrests; some people were selling horse meat, and a couple people were actually butchering horses. So then I sat down with the Miami-Dade police and I said, 'You need to do something about the illegal slaughter farms because it is really the engine that is driving the horse-meat trade here.' They wanted no part of it."



A severely neglected Freedom's Flight 18 months ago.

Kudo founded [Animal Recovery Mission](#) (ARM), a nonprofit, to help address the issue. In the process of his work — some undercover, some showcased in the media — he has made both friends and enemies. In addition to the calls and emails from people who want to help, he's received death threats. "I am personally shutting down a multi-million-dollar industry here, and

there are pockets that are being greased," says Kudo. "I had to move out of my house. I moved into a new place, and I keep all the utilities out of my name; no one knows that I live here."

With his face more familiar to the public, Kudo sometimes uses covert measures to collect evidence. "I have disguises," he explains. "I'll throw on a wig and a moustache, throw a hat on. Other times, I will dress as official as I can and I'll walk in and say, 'I'm from the Animal Recovery Mission, and I'm here to inspect the animals.' What it takes is dressing official, being confident, and a lot of times these people will let me inspect the properties." And if he finds a violation? "I photograph it, I videotape it, and I leave. I used to take that evidence to the Miami-Dade Police Department, but now they're throwing my evidence away, so now I am working closely with the state attorney's office as an advisor."

He also spends plenty of time just observing. "I do a lot of nighttime operations, a lot of surveillance. Some of the properties I can see from the street side or an adjoining parcel. Basically, I'm hiding in the bushes for 10 hours and filming what they're doing. How they're slaughtering and what they're slaughtering with."

Images show animals on slaughter farms eating garbage, which Kudo has traced to Cuban restaurants. "This is what they do: They'll have an agreement with a restaurant, and the restaurant owners, the busboys, and waiters will put the paper waste in one barrel and the food waste in another. They try to separate it, but a lot of the garbage isn't separated. About every three days the slaughter farm owners will come up to the restaurant and collect the garbage; in return, they'll sell their meat to the restaurant at a discounted price. I'm talking about whatever garbage you can think of — plastic gloves, rubber gloves, plastic bags, everything." He also believes local prisons have a similar garbage-for-meat arrangement with illegal slaughterhouses.



Freedom's Flight today.

Horse meat is a slaughter farm's most lucrative product, selling for as much as \$40 a pound. As mentioned, it's motivated some involved in the trade to seek horses not just from auctions but from people's homes. In one case Kudo told me about, a pregnant mare was butchered alive and began to give birth to her foal. "There's a particular way you have to cut the throat of an animal for it to be humane, and these people are not doing it; they're cutting right into the windpipe of the horses, which means they are suffering a monstrously cruel death. They are choking on their own blood. It takes a horse 15 minutes to die from something like that. The people killing these horses are on private property; they want to harvest the meat and get away as quickly as possible, so once the animal hits the ground, they start carving."

Another killing, as described to police by a defendant, is even more disturbing. Kudo explains: "One of the worst cases was a mare who had a foal. They slashed her throat, and she didn't go down right away, so they took a metal pipe and they broke her legs. She finally went down with her foal by her side, and they started to harvest right when she hit the ground. One man sat on her head, another sat on her neck. They taped the foal's mouth shut because she was crying out for her mother. They left with the back legs of the mare, 80 percent of her flesh, and they admitted to the Miami-Dade Police Department that while they were leaving, the mare was still trying to cry out for her foal. When I got there the next morning, the foal was trying to nurse off the mare's carcass. That is what is going on here, and that's why I'm not backing down."

Though Kudo has made headlines and is determined to succeed, he recognizes he has a long way to go. "This industry is far from being shut down," he says. "This is the first stage. It's far from over."

What You Can Do:

- Kudo has listed on his [Website](#) a number of county officials you can contact to express your concern about the horse killings and illegal slaughterhouses in Miami-Dade County.
- You can also add Kudo as a friend on [Facebook](#).
- Of course, [contributions](#) to ARM are always appreciated.