

Get to Know the Organization that Helps Animal Grantmakers

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Three decades ago, Melanie Anderson had just started her career at the Summerlee Foundation. Looking to meet others focused on animal welfare grantmaking, she attended a conference for environmental grantmakers. She figured it was the best possible place to find peers.

As Anderson recalls it, she went to a session on how the environmental movement can reach out to other groups of funders. The leader stood up and said: “One of the things the environmental movement needs to do is distance itself from the animal rights movement as much as possible.”

Anderson, who still serves as program director at Summerlee, told me that experience pushed her to help create a space for funders like her.

Not long after, in 1999, Anderson and animal welfare grantmakers from 16 other foundations gathered in Crystal City, Virginia, to discuss the idea of setting up their own group. Two subsequent meetings, both in Dallas, sealed the deal. [Animal Grantmakers](#), a group for funders from all corners of the animal welfare field, was born.

Fast forward more than two decades, and the group now has 35 members, including six individuals from that first meeting. It has overseen tremendous growth in its sphere of philanthropy. At the time of that first meeting in Old Dominion, the assembled grantmakers were making an estimated \$20 million to \$25 million in grants annually, according to an estimate from Andrew Rowan, a founding member of the group. Now, animal welfare grantmaking totals more than \$200 million a year. In 2020, giving to the environment and animals increased 9.4% after inflation, according to Giving USA.

Here's a look at the role this affinity group plays for its members and others in the animal welfare movement.

What Animal Grantmakers does

Animal Grantmakers' core member services are similar to those of many affinity groups. The group offers one-on-one assistance to new members, including pairing them up with mentors. Like many of its peers, the group holds an annual conference, which went online during the pandemic, but used to attract up to 80 attendees.

It also helps coordinate groups of its members with similar interests. That can mean helping to align funding, but also supporting efforts like lobbying and advocacy, or even more hands-on projects. For instance, not long ago, it helped a group of members find homes for 60 animals, including tigers,

lions, bears, leopards and chimpanzees, that were left without homes when an animal sanctuary in Sylmar, California, closed.

“Our focus isn’t just on the issues as much as support for the organization,” said Vince Wong, president of the [Michelson Found Animals Foundation](#) and chair of the Animal Grantmakers’ board of directors. Citing other aims of the organization, he said, “Understanding what you can do as a foundation, what are the tactics and tools you can use.”

It’s a relatively diverse group, with funders focused on companion animals making up a large share of membership, but also a variety of wildlife grantmakers. About a third of members also do grantmaking related to farm animals—one of the sector’s fastest growing segments—though most leading players in that space belong to [Farmed Animal Funders](#), a dedicated group for such grantmakers.

While the animal rights movement has [traditionally been known as “very white,”](#) the group is trying to elevate diversity, equity and inclusion in its work, including holding a focused session at its recent conference and related programs and resources in its project pipeline, including a workforce development initiative.

“We hope to be at the forefront of what those strategies and tactics are,” Wong said.

The group has also long sought to track grantmaking in the field, with efforts dating back virtually to its founding. Its most recent project, the [Animal Funding Atlas](#), launched in 2018 with the support of some of the most prominent funders in the field, including American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Maddie’s Fund, Summerlee Foundation and Tigers in America. The interactive database could still grow. Significant animal welfare grantmakers like Petco Love (formerly the Petco Foundation) are not yet included. But Wong said it is already proving its

value. “It’s been critically important in deciding where to do grantmaking and where to direct philanthropic resources,” he said.

The affinity group has also recently launched a quasi-magazine, hosted online by Giving Compass, with monthly articles on Animal issues. It offers profiles of some of their members and founders, such as [Rowan](#) and [Anderson](#), as well as coverage of recent trends in the field. Such educational efforts, which include occasional webinars, are part of the group’s foundational approach to driving change.

“It’s not just writing checks to organizations and wipe your hands and you’re done,” Wong said. Members of Animal Grantmakers “really partner with grantees, really want to build a real structure for change. Learning and understanding are key.”

For all the growth in the field in the past three decades, the network is still maturing and growing. The group became a 501(c)(3) only in 2015. Its lone staff person is part-time. The group’s working board remains key to its operations. That reflects, in some ways, the relatively small size of the field. Animal protection organizations receive less than 2% of all charitable contributions, according to Giving USA.

The “Rodney Dangerfield” of philanthropy

While much has changed since Anderson attended that fateful conference, a sense of marginalization within philanthropy is one element of the group and sector’s identity. Rowan, who serves as president at WellBeing International and has been called the “dean of animal grantmaking,” is fond of saying animal welfare is the “Rodney Dangerfield” of philanthropy. “It gets no respect.”

Members of the field say they have to fight against a perception that supporting animals is mutually exclusive from supporting humans. Yet whether it is [helping](#) domestic violence shelters upgrade so they can admit

victims with pets, [aiding](#) individuals and animals fleeing disasters, [supporting](#) veterans and others with PTSD, or dog training programs in prisons, there is much crossover between the priorities of companion animal grantmakers and other funders, given the inextricable role of animals in humans' lives. Advocates point to studies showing pets can prevent loneliness, boost compassion, improve fitness, and more.

“It’s not just some fluffy, feel-good, non-important area of philanthropy. The ways it intersects are just so numerous,” said Jill Hoffman, member engagement and outreach consultant at Animal Grantmakers. “Helping animals actually helps people too.”