The Art of Gentle Persuasion
Tips for lobbying your legislators

Howard Baskin was mystified. The bill, a measure to protect big cats in the United States, seemed to be a no-brainer. And yet it kept stalling out.

So in 2005, the advisory board chairman for Big Cat Rescue in Tampa traveled to the HSLF-supported Taking Action for Animals conference in Washington, D.C., determined to learn more about the process in which a bill becomes a law—and what, if any, role he could play. After a weekend of workshops and speeches, participants headed to Capitol Hill to meet with legislators.

"I remember walking through the halls of Congress that first time," Baskin says, "being kind of like a first-grader, looking around like, 'Wow, look where we are! And the idea of going in to actually talk to a legislator or their aides was kind of a scary thing.

"And it turns out that it's not scary at all. Like most things, once you do it once, it's no longer a mystery—and becomes quite comfortable."

Seven years later, Baskin is anything but a wide-eyed rookie when it comes to communicating with his legislators. Having returned each year for TAFA and his annual trip to the Hill, he's established a rapport with the office of Rep. Kathy Castor, speaking with the Florida Democrat and her aides about everything from horse slaughter, to puppy mills, to animal fighting, to constrictor snakes.

When HSLS released its annual Humane Scorecard earlier this year, Castor owned a perfect score of 100, thanks in part to Baskin's work. Now, for other advocates looking to speak to their legislators—on a summer trip to Washington or a free afternoon in their hometown—he offers a few hints.

► VALUE THE AIDES. If a legislator sends an aide to speak with you, that doesn't mean you're getting blown off, Baskin cautions. "The aides are critical to the process," he says, "... because the legislators rely on the aides to research a topic, and look at both sides of it, and ... recommend the decisions about what a legislator should do."

► BUILD CREDIBILITY. Try approaching the issue like the aide will have to, Baskin says, and that means providing honest answers to questions like: Who will stand in opposition? What will their arguments be? Will there be a big pushback? This will help build credibility—and down the road, when a slam-dunk issue arises, make a no-brainer that much more obvious.

Bringing a one-page fact sheet will give you not only something to refer to, but something to leave behind as well. As Baskin says, just ensure that "every sentence [is] defensible."

► ESTABLISH A RAPPORT. This comes in part from dressing professionally, avoiding unrealistic demands, and speaking slowly and evenly—when discussing emotional topics. It also comes from meeting more than once.

Baskin also emphasizes the importance of maintaining contact in between meetings, even if you're not asking for anything. For example, he learned Castor was interested in Florida panthers, so when a local newspaper ran a feature story on the animals, he clipped it out and mailed it to her.

► DON'T GET FRUSTRATED. Particularly if you have a representative who is not inclined your way, it's still useful for him or her to know that there are constituents who feel this way; Baskin says. "We've done a number of visits that didn't get results, in terms of action on the part of the legislator. But those visits served to build this rapport that can lead to more success later, particularly as they come to know you and trust you."

TAKE ACTION
The nation's largest animal advocacy conference, Taking Action for Animals, runs July 27-30 in Washington, D.C. Explore the exhibit hall, meet new friends, and learn how to help animals. For more information, visit takingactionforanimals.org.

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