

MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus performs its final show in New York City this evening, capping off a nearly 150-year run. And while many are sorry to see the circus close, animal welfare activists are counting this as a major victory. The Humane Society of the United States and the people for the Ethical Treatment of Animals see the closing as part of a broader trend in the way Americans think about animals and treat them.

GREG ALLEN, BYLINE: If you've gone to the circus in recent years, you probably saw them.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PROTESTORS: (Chanting) Boycott the circus.

ALLEN: That's from a protest outside the Ringling Brothers Circus when it was in Phoenix earlier this year. In January when Feld Entertainment said this would be the Ringling Brothers' last season, animal welfare groups cheered. The circus and how it treats its animals, especially elephants and big cats, has long been a focus for the groups.

LISA LANGE: PETA was founded in 1980 and Ringling Brothers was a target of ours from the very beginning.

ALLEN: Lisa Lange with PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, believes the protests played a key role in changing public attitudes about the circus. In announcing the end, Feld Entertainment chairman Kenneth Feld acknowledged the decades of conflict with animal welfare groups. But he said the decision was made because of declining attendance and a change in public taste. Here's Lange.

LANGE: Yes. People no longer have a taste for that kind of entertainment, but we believe it's because they now know what that kind of entertainment cost those animals.

ALLEN: The demise of the Ringling Brothers' circus comes just months after SeaWorld agreed to stop breeding its captive orcas and to move away from its signature theatrical shows around the same time the National Aquarium in Baltimore announced it was closing its dolphin exhibit and would move its dolphins to an ocean sanctuary. Wayne Pacelle of the Humane Society of the U.S. believes a major change is going on in how Americans view animal welfare issues.

WAYNE PACELLE: It's happening across the economy. It's happening across our culture, and we're really seeing a rising tide of consciousness when it comes to the treatment of animals.

ALLEN: Animal welfare groups have seen success in many other areas as well. In the last few years, major pork producers have eliminated confinement pens for pregnant sows. Egg producers have also begun getting rid of cages for their chickens. Pacelle says some of this has been accomplished through legislation. In other cases, change had been pushed by retailers like McDonald's and Wal-Mart.

PACELLE: In most cases, companies are now adapting. They're simply changing the way they do business to reflect a greater consciousness about animals and ringing the animal cruelty out of the business model.

ALLEN: Lisa Lange of PETA says after decades of working on animal rights, she believes the movement has finally hit the mainstream. A major factor she believes is the power of social media.

LANGE: We have the ability to show people a video of elephants, for example, being beaten behind the scenes at a Ringling Brothers' performance, and we put that up on our Facebook page, Instagram. We tweet it out and millions of people see that video within hours.

ALLEN: Pacelle cites a powerful example, the death of Cecil the lion. For years, the Humane Society worked to stop trophy hunting of lions, elephants and other big game with limited success. But two years ago when a Minnesota dentist killed a lion in Zimbabwe named Cecil, Pacelle recalls it went viral.

PACELLE: Many of these things go unnoticed, but one brave Zimbabwean activist got a hold of the image of the grinning hunters over the slain lion. And within 24 hours, more than a billion people had seen it.

ALLEN: Soon, all the major air carriers had agreed to ban shipment of lion, elephant, rhino and other large animal trophies worldwide. Pacelle believes concern about animal welfare is now a value shared by all Americans. The question is what that will mean for agriculture, entertainment, research and other fields in which animals play a role? Greg Allen, NPR News.