

By [Deirdra Funcheon](#)

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[Couto at the Gadhimai Festival in Nepal, where animals are slaughtered for rituals.](#)

Richard Couto borrows his looks from Mr. Clean: bald and intimidatingly muscular. He seems more comfortable in full combat gear than in a pair of Dockers. But as tough as he appears, inside of this ex-Blackwater contractor lurks a major soft spot — an all-consuming passion for animals.

Last week, Couto and the group he founded, [Animal Recovery Mission Investigations](#), worked in conjunction with the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office to take down what Couto calls "the largest tactical strike on animal cruelty in the history of the U.S."

[At 4:30 a.m. Tuesday October 13](#), police units assembled for a coordinated bust at three illegal farms in Loxahatchee — Rancho Garcia, G.A. Paso Fino, and Medina Farm. Altogether, Couto says, there were nine SWAT teams, a bomb squad, and 150 uniformed officers and USDA officials. He gathered his team of investigators and veterinarians at a compound nearby.

Then — boom — when it was time for a takedown, "all the workers' homes and owners/controllers were struck at same time," Couto says. "You're looking at 12 to 15 locations struck at once, a very organized tactical strike."

A few hours later, six people had been carted off to jail, and PBSO suddenly had 750 animals to take care of. Couto says his team took 300 animals to its sanctuary — the location of which he can't reveal because "we have bounties on our heads." Friends and relatives of the arrested will be "looking for our animals," he says. "They would also kill the investigators." Couto explained to *New Times* how he infiltrated and helped take down the operators.

He has had an interesting career path, described in a [2010 *New Times* cover story called "Yuppie Rambo."](#) After working for Blackwater, Couto settled in Miami Beach and began to develop real estate. On the side, he began volunteering with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Eventually, he came to assist investigators. One time, he helped expose an illegal slaughterhouse, but when he asked a cop on scene whether they were going to shut it down, she just shrugged her shoulders and said, "We don't do that kind of work."

"Ethically, I was so sickened by the lack of enforcement of this industry," he says, that he began doing his own SPCA investigations. But "so many death threats started to come in that they basically told me to throw out my files or leave. I left and started ARM to fight illegal horse slaughter and extreme animal cruelty." Now, he says, he operates in 12 counties in Florida, in 20 states, and in dangerous places around the world, including Juarez, Mexico — where murders happened a block away — and in Nepal, where a religious festival called [Gadhimai](#) includes the slaughtering of 400,000 animals.

Says Couto: "We go deeper, for longer, in more dangerous operations than anyone will in the world."

His achievements include rescuing a thoroughbred named Freedom Flight and convincing law enforcement that animal abuse is a matter to be taken seriously. "What we've done in Miami-Dade is really educate judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and bond companies," he explains. Whereas animal cruelty used to be treated as a small-time crime, now, bondsmen "won't even bond these people out because of what they've seen on the news. That's what the press has done and what we've done in educating the public officials."

Locally, he says, the market for slaughtered animals remains robust, especially among Cubans who practice Santeria and use animals for sacrifice. "It's huge," he says. He adds that Haitian and Middle Eastern immigrants also sacrifice animals in religious ceremonies.

The customers who patronize illegal farms also "like the feeling of going into these little farms and picking out animals and having fresh meat," he explains. "They'll take a picture of the animal alive — and one of eating it at dinner that night."

Months ago, he was tipped off that an illegal slaughterhouse was operating on Rancho Garcia. He slipped into character acting as a "Southern hillbilly redneck" named Martin who had handyman services to offer the farm.

"I'd go in and talk about construction," he explains. "If you guys ever need anything..." He became friendly with the farm staff, and after a few visits, he'd say, "I see you have signs chickens for sale..." Eventually, he started buying goats.

Meanwhile, Couto says, he found the two other operations — Medina Farms and Paso Fino — just by using Google Earth. "We've done these investigations for eight or nine years, so I know what to look for on satellite images. Then we fly drones over the site to confirm our suspicions." Creating a personal relationship is key to infiltrating these operations, Couto says. "Have you ever seen the movie *Donnie Brasco*?" he asks. "It's the same exact thing. It's how the Mafia was taken down in the U.S. The [illegal slaughterhouse industry] is organized crime, and it's Mafia."

He employs former Navy SEALs and Marines to carry out investigations. "We don't hire people because they're animal lovers," he says. "I need someone who can do the investigation, get the job done, and get the evidence."

As part of their missions, his group conducts long-distance and nighttime surveillance: "Monitor people going in and out, animals coming in." They'll wear body cams to catch people killing horses and selling horse meat. He's caught people boiling animals alive, skinning them, using animals to fight to the death for sport, and more.

Unethical farmers will drag an animal behind a truck or hang a goat upside down and skin it alive because, he says, "they don't want to pay 20 cents for a bullet."

Couto has drawn ire from poor farmers who contend that he is a rich outsider who doesn't understand their culture or the subsistence lifestyle of poor immigrants.

Some people aren't consciously sadistic, Couto concedes — "It's the way they were raised and taught in Cuba to kill animals. They didn't have guns, so they used pickaxes and sledgehammers and knives."

During an investigation, he'll try to catch illegal methods on video — "people putting pigs into boiling water while still alive to get their hair off. Goats, they'll just take alive — throw it to the ground and start stabbing it to death while the goat's screaming." Cows are frequently shot with a .22-caliber rifle, "which never kills the animal. It takes the cows 15 to 20 minutes just to die." His videos capture the pulse in the animal's neck while it's skinned alive.

For evidence to hold up in court, he says, "you have to make it clear that the animal is being bought for a barbecue, not for sacrifice — they can use that distinction [as a defense]. I have on tape, [a worker] saying it's not for religion, it's for barbecue."

On the busted farms, Couto says, he found puppy mills — "they may have been selling them for sacrifice" — and dire conditions like rusty cages.

Horses, he says, were kept in a rusted-out trailer with no food or water. Acting as "Martin," he'd "have to make an excuse to use a hose to put water in their bowls."

He says that at Paso Fino, workers boiled crocodile parts while the animal was still alive and that "children as young as 5 were forced to watch the torture by their parents."

The owner of Rancho Garcia, he says, eats cats. "He loves cat meat. He said, 'I do it because that's what I did in Cuba.'"

Animal deaths that Couto witnessed at Medina Farms, he says, "were all brutal, but the most torturous death was the cattle." Whereas at a legal slaughterhouse, cows are killed in a stall by themselves with a bolt to the head, here "they dragged cattle hundreds of feet with a pickup truck after it was shot and stabbed, its head cut off and beaten... 100 percent at Medina were butchered alive."

Couto says his work isn't vigilante justice. "All we're doing is collecting evidence," he says. Once ARM has a sizeable case, it creates a report, puts video on a CD, requests a meeting with law enforcement and prosecutors — "and press play."

Couto says that he is not burdened by laws that prevent audio recordings (because live in person, at a business, it doesn't violate wiretapping laws) and that there are no so-called "ag gag" laws in Florida that prevent activists from filming on farms. Besides, he claims, those "wouldn't pertain to an illegal operation."

Couto says ARM has helped pass two state laws — one criminalizing bestiality, and another the "good horse slaughter act."

Although police have sometimes been frustrated with him for instigating conflicts and possibly putting his life at risk, Couto claims law enforcement has largely come to appreciate that ARM does the legwork — and absorbs most of the cost — of an investigation. So far, he says, investigations have led to raids on 70 farms, so for donors, "that's a good return on investment." And he insists that the personal risk is worth the reward of hopefully getting bad businesses shut down forever. "I testify in court. I'm in news stories and on TV." But he can change his appearance and keep his location secret. "I'll go back into those farms."

The 44-year-old, who has no kids, says, "My security, I could care less about. If I was to be taken down during [a raid], it would still be worth it to me. If I am taken out, it would be worth my life to shut down some of these operations. I respect the life of an animal more than a human being. Unfortunately, humans have lost my trust."

That said, he warns, ARM is "currently undercover in multiple zones in Florida. Strikes are imminent."