ANIMALS

Resistance is Futile: PETA Attempts to Halt the Sale of Remote-Controlled Cyborg Cockroaches

The robot bugs are part of an educational kit, but PETA argues they’re torture.

By Anita Hamilton @anitafhamilton | Nov. 01, 2013 | 18 Comments

People have done many terrible things to cockroaches in the name of fear: impaled them with a shoe, squashed them in a tissue, and water tortured them down the drain. Now People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is claiming that a government-funded neuroscience startup is doing terrible things to roaches in the name of education.

Backyard Brains in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which is backed by the National Institute of Mental Health, sells a $99 kit that lets anyone with time, patience, and a spare cockroach create a RoboRoach, a living cockroach whose movements are remotely controlled by its human caretaker. “It’s an educational kit, it’s not a toy,” says Backyard Brains co-founder Greg Gage, who adds, “we want people to learn about the biological systems.”
Using the same concept as deep brain stimulation, in which electrodes implanted in people’s brains help control symptoms of Parkinson’s and other neurological disorders, the kit attaches electrodes to the antennas of a live cockroach, then shocks it with three-volt jolts to get the bug to move in whichever direction the user designates. (The kit comes with a toy remote control for now, but upcoming versions will work with most smartphones.)

Building your very own cyborg bug involves dipping a live cockroach in ice water to anesthetize it, cutting off most of its antennas, inserting electrodes into the remaining stumps, then supergluing a little headset atop the insect’s head. A small receiver snaps into the headset and rests on the bug’s back. Feeling queasy yet?

To stop any more Franken-bug kits from being created — about 300 have been sold so far, according to the company — PETA filed a complaint with Michigan’s attorney general and state regulators charging that Backyard Brains is practicing veterinary medicine without a license. That’s a felony, by the way.

“It’s not okay to torture and mutilate cockroaches,” says PETA attorney, Jared Goodman. “There is no way a child is going to learn anything about neurological diseases or be interested in studying it in the future based on mutilating a cockroach.”

“We’re not breaking any laws,” says Backyard Brains’ co-founder Greg Gage, who adds that the ice-water anesthetization ensures a painless operation and that the roaches lead normal lives once the electrodes’ effect wears off after a week or so. “These are roaches that people would easily kill in their apartments.”

True, but most people wouldn’t stick electrodes in them. We’d just flush them down the toilet and forget ‘em.
Hamilton is a contributor to TIME and TIME.com who covers business, technology, lifestyle and an oddball assortment of other topics. Follow her on Twitter or find links to all her stories here.