

Think Globally

BY HOLLY STEWART

Act With Your Fork!

Einstein was a vegetarian. So was Plato, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, Tolstoy, George Bernard Shaw, Ghandi, and many other respected leaders down through history. They all recognized that eating a plant-based diet was the single most effective contribution to world issues of health, environmental sustainability, and animal compassion.

When we reach for animal products in our grocery stores or order them from restaurants, we do not see the untold suffering and environmental costs they represent. We do not know, or do not wish to know, those implications because we already feel powerless to make a difference in the world. What can one person do? The answer is everything! When you shift your food choices to a plant-based diet, or even just reduce the amount of animal products you eat each day, you become part of the solution.

Land Use and World Hunger

Agriculture uses an enormous amount of our natural resources, in large part to produce animal products. Half of the world's grain harvest in the 1980s was fed not to people, but to livestock.¹ Even during the famine of the mid-1980s, Ethiopia was exporting grain to the West for livestock that could have been used to feed its people.

The great demand for animal feed encourages people in third world countries to abandon sustainable farming practices in order to grow cash crops for export. Converting forests to grazing land for cattle destroys wildlife

“Nothing will benefit human health and increase the chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet.”

Albert Einstein

habitats, endangering an indeterminate number of animal and plant species. Soils are very thin in most tropical forests, and, once cleared, they can support cultivation for only a few years before rains leach out nutrients and erode the vital topsoil, laying the land to waste. Profits are short-lived, as the marginal lands quickly erode, contributing to poverty, malnutrition, and further economic vulnerability.

Converting feed into animal products is also notoriously inefficient. It takes 16 pounds of grain and soy to produce just one pound of beef, from cattle raised in a typical North American feedlot operation.² And by doing so, 90 percent of the nutrients, 99 percent of the carbohydrates, and 100% of the fibre is lost. The amount

of grain fed to farm animals could feed seven times as many people if they were to consume it directly rather than in the form of animal products.³

Water and Pollution

Animal agriculture also consumes a staggering amount of water. It takes 5,214 gallons of water to produce one pound of beef. By contrast, it takes 25 gallons of water to produce one pound of wheat.⁴ Not only does contemporary animal agriculture use up enormous amounts of precious resources, it also pollutes and destroys them. The Environmental Protection Agency has classified agriculture as the leading cause of water pollution. The average BC dairy herd of 100 cows produces about 7500 litres of waste per day.⁵ With an estimated 12.5 million cattle in Canada, that represents about 950 million litres of waste per day, which contributes to the pollution of our drinking and ground water. This waste plus the pesticides and fertilizers used to grow feed are the number one non-point source of water pollution in North America.⁶

Compassion

While it may surprise many people, the animals most commonly used for food (chickens, cows and pigs) are complex, sensitive, highly social animals. They retain the needs and behavioural drives of their ancestors and wild relatives. Factory farms, in which the vast majority of farm animals are raised, are systems of extreme confinement in which the greatest possible number of animals are raised in the smallest possible space, and natur-

al behaviour is impossible. Managers are free to use whatever methods of production are most profitable, regardless of their impact on the animals' well-being. Hidden from the public eye, the horrific conditions of animals in factory farms and slaughterhouses are never considered when the disassembled animal parts arrive on one's plate.

Animals are transported to slaughterhouses without food or water, packed in trucks so tightly that they can scarcely move, sometimes for as long as 48 hours. Those that arrive too sick to stand up are pushed off the trucks with shovels or dragged off by the leg with chains. One trucker tells of "cattle with broken legs that were dragged off the trailers at the slaughterhouse, one case taking over two hours to get the cow from the front nose of the trailer to the back by prodding it nearly to death, and the cow trying its hardest to move its 1500 lb. body on a slippery, shitty floor on three legs."⁷

A writer from The Toronto Star visited one of the largest pork-producing plants in Ontario, where 20,000 pigs a week are turned into bacon, ham and chops. "I can't soon forget the screams and struggles of these pigs as they had to be driven with electric cattle prods up the final ramp to the gas chamber. Pigs are very intelligent animals with highly sensitive noses. It was clear they could smell the blood [from the killing floor ahead] and could tell they were about to die. They were filled with terror. The worst experience was at a packing plant for veal. These calves were being slaughtered kosher, which means their throats were sliced open while they were fully conscious. I found it deeply repugnant."⁸

How You Can Make A Difference

North America's unnecessarily destructive and excessive production of meat and other animal products, and the subsequent overconsumption of them, is the cause of many of our health problems as well as those of our environment. A change to more humane and sustainable systems can lead to a revolution in our food system that will benefit all. More dollars flowing to family owned, organic farms will encourage others to farm this way, while less money spent on monoculture crops and factory-farmed products will make them less economically viable.

Be part of the solution! When choosing a more humane diet, consider the three R's when you shop or dine out:

Refine your diet by purchasing products obtained from more humane and sustainable systems. Shop at farmers' markets, health food stores, and food co-ops.

Reduce your consumption of animal products, for your own health as well as that of the environment.

Replace animal products with organically grown, whole foods such as grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables. Your diet will easily become more varied, healthful and compassionate.

Contact EarthSave Canada for a free information package and information about cookbooks, dining guides and cooking classes.

"The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated."

**Mohandas
Ghandi,
THE MORAL BASIS
OF VEGETARIANISM**

1. USDA 1989 Agricultural Chartbook
2. USDA, Scientific American
3. Our Food Our World, John Robbins 1992
4. "Water Requirements for Food Production" Population, Resources, Environment
5. BC Federation of Agriculture: Environmental Guidelines for Dairy Producers in BC
6. Beyond Beef, Jeremy Rifkin 1992
7. Canadians for the Ethical Treatment of Food Animals, Fall 1995 newsletter
8. Ethics column by Tom Harpur, The Toronto Star, August 18, 1991

