

Food for Thought The Environmental Impact of Your Food Choices

BY SOPHIA MAXWELL

Water pollution and global warming, rainforest destruction and collapsing oceans: these are just some of the environmental perils which threaten the future of this earth and which rip

through the raw beauty of the natural world. Read on, and you will discover that meat production carries much of the blame. This article will feed you the facts the meat industry has tried to hide. It will expose the damage and the suffering which can be linked to livestock farming, and will offer you a healthy, sustainable vegetarian alternative.

The "production" of meat is the most wasteful form of food production ever devised. The production of one pound of beef requires 2,500 gallons of water. It takes less water to produce a year's worth of food for a vegan (a pure vegetarian, or one who consumes no meat, eggs, or dairy products) than to produce one month's food for a meat-eater. The U.S. livestock population consumes enough grain and soybeans to feed more than five times the entire U.S. population. One acre of prime land can produce

an average of 250 pounds of beef, while the same acre can produce 40,000 pounds of potatoes.

As 38 per cent of the world's grain is fed to animals, 60 million people starve to death each year in the developing world. Instead of using indigenous land to feed their own starving populations, the land in developing countries usually goes to the highest bidder. This often means that the land is used to produce beef for export to rich countries rather than plant foods for the poor. Seventy-five per cent of the grain exported from North America to third world countries goes towards this livestock production.

It has been estimated that if Americans reduced their meat consumption by only 10 percent, it would free 12 million tons of grain annually for human consumption. That alone would be enough to adequately feed the world's population. Many of the reasons for this hunger are political, but to waste valuable land to feed animals and not people has to be madness.

As the animals eat, nature takes its course and much of the excrement from "food" animals (which amounts to 20 times as much fecal matter as human waste) flows unfiltered into our lakes and streams. U.S. cattle produces 158 million tons of waste each year. Two hundred times more polluting than human waste, this waste — along with the waste from pesticides, herbi-

cides and fertilizers which are used to grow food for livestock — is the number one cause of water pollution in the US. The Netherlands has so many waste-producing animals that they have been declared a "manure surplus region" and have actually started shipping their waste to the developing world for disposal. In this crazy system, the poor feed our animals with their grain and then have to dispose of the feces as we eat the meat.

Raising animals for food also requires intensive use of fossil fuels. Fuel is needed to transport animal feed, to heat animal shelters (often large buildings) and to transport animals to slaughter. Ruminant livestock like sheep and cows also damage the atmosphere. Their flatulence results in the release of 80 million tons of methane every year. The heavy fossil fuel requirement and methane production both contribute to the problem of global warming.

More than four million acres of cropland are lost to erosion in the United States every year. Once the topsoil has been eroded, land becomes unusable. So far the US has lost 22 million acres of land; 85 percent is directly associated with livestock raising (i.e. over-grazing).

Throughout the world, forests are being destroyed to support the meat-eating habits of the "developed" nations. Between 1960 and 1985, nearly 40 percent of all Central American rain forests were destroyed to create pasture for beef cattle. The rain forests are

the primary source of oxygen for the entire planet; the very survival of the Earth is linked to their survival. The forests also provide ingredients for many medicines used to treat and cure human illnesses, and these resources have yet to be explored for their full potential. Every day 50 species of tropical fauna or flora become extinct as the destruction continues. In the past 20 years approximately 1 million species have disappeared. Clearing forests for cattle also adds to the greenhouse effect. As the ranchers slash and burn the trees they release huge amounts of carbon dioxide — some of their smoke clouds have been visible from space! Since 1970, the cattlemen have destroyed 20 million hectares of rainforest and produced 1.4 billion tons of carbon dioxide.

This insanity has also spread to the oceans, where huge trawlers smash through the oceans' ecosystems. Overfishing has sent nine of the world's 17 fisheries into collapse as the other fisheries strain under the relentless onslaught of a fishing industry which doesn't even pay its way — the world spends US\$124 billion every year to catch just US\$70 billion of fish.

It doesn't have to be this way. By becoming vegetarian, you can join millions of others who have had enough of the pollution, the cruelty and the destruction. By purchasing meat you are contributing to the problem — why not help work towards a solution! Vegetarian food is healthier, safer and less costly to our small, blue world. It is also much kinder to animals. In the words of John Robbins, author of *Diet for a New America* and President of EarthSave:

"A reduction in beef and other meat consumption is the most potent single act you can take to halt the destruction of our environment and preserve our natural resources. Our choices do matter. What's healthiest for each of us personally is also healthiest for the life support system of our precious, but wounded planet."



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