

## **To meat or not to meat: reducing your eco-footprint**

‘Nothing will benefit human health and increase chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet.’ **Albert Einstein**

Vegetarians are asking questions about the food they eat and are trying to connect the food they eat to morality: animal rights, health, the environment, eco-footprint, food shortages, and costs to people in developing countries. And we have a choice - to eat meat or not to eat meat.

Eating less meat and animal products (even if that just means having one meat free day per week), or foregoing them altogether, is one small way for individuals to make an impact on some of the massive injustices facing our world today: from poverty and ill health, to environmental degradation and climate change. Not everyone can afford solar panels or a hybrid car, but our diet is one thing that we have the power to change and make a definite impact with.

### **Climate Change**

Climate change is a serious issue which must be addressed urgently. All social justice issues are interconnected. The damage which climate change is causing and will inflict upon all communities, environments, and economies. The livestock industry accounts for 18% of greenhouse gas emissions, which is higher than transport’s contribution.<sup>1</sup> This is due to the emission by livestock of gases such as methane and nitrous oxide, which are very powerful greenhouse gases. Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Dr Rajendra Pachauri, has highlighted the importance of lifestyle changes, noting that just a kilo of meat can create up 36 kilograms of carbon dioxide, before the energy costs of transporting that meat are even taken into account.<sup>2</sup>

One recent study, from the University of Chicago, has shown that switching to a vegetarian diet is more beneficial for the environment than buying a Prius (a hybrid electric car), as well as being significantly easier on the wallet. However, there is no need to cut all animal products a diet: even cutting back from two hamburgers to one per week can have a significant impact.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Livestock, Environment and Development Initiative, (2006) *Livestock’s Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and options* [ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/A0701E/A0701E00.pdf](http://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/A0701E/A0701E00.pdf) p.23

<sup>2</sup> ABC News, *Lifestyle changes can curb climate change* (2008)  
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/01/16s/2139349.htm?section=world>

<sup>3</sup>The University of Chicago, *Study: Vegan Diets healthier for planet, people than meat diets*  
<http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/06/060413.diet.shtml>

### Environmental Issues

The United Nations has reported that livestock is a major factor in deforestation; is responsible for 8% of water use; causes 55% of erosion and sediment; and is the leading cause of loss of biodiversity.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the consumption of meat is growing as both wealth and globalisation increase. In 2050, global consumption of meat will be twice that of 1999. If we are to simply maintain the present level of environmental damage, we must cut our consumption of meat in half, rather than allowing it to grow. It is estimated that global meat consumption will need to be reduced to half of current levels simply to maintain the present rate of environmental damage.<sup>5</sup>

### Use of Resources

'A quarter-pound hamburger is estimated to require 11,000 litres of water to produce (while a kilo of wheat - almost nine times the weight - requires but 1,000 litres).<sup>6</sup> For instance, pig farms use nearly three kilos of grain for every 500 grams of boneless meat;<sup>7</sup> and 8 kilos of grain to produce one kilo of beef.<sup>8</sup>

The fertiliser used to grow this scale of grain can also create serious environmental problems. And furthermore, the packaging and transport of meat often uses up significant amounts of energy as it must be refrigerated; and cooked at high temperatures before it even gets to the table.<sup>9</sup> Frances Moore Lappe, in her book 'Diet for a small planet' called this a 'protein factory in reverse', as meat yields less protein and fewer calories than it consumes. The amount of grain fed to American livestock could alternatively feed 800 million people a vegetarian diet (ABC Radio National interview on 'Earthbeat,' 20 July, 2002).<sup>10</sup> Reversing, or at least curtailing, this process is even more important given the global food crisis. (See Just Comment: Food Today...what about tomorrow?)

---

<sup>4</sup> Livestock, Environment and Development Initiative, (2006) *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and options* <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/A0701E/A0701E00.pdf> pp.22-25

<sup>5</sup> Livestock, Environment and Development Initiative, (2006) *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and options* <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/A0701E/A0701E00.pdf> p.22

<sup>6</sup> Fox, Michael Allen. (2008) *Eating our way to a better future*. Island (Sandy Bay, Tas), no.114, Spring 38-44.

<sup>7</sup> Singer, Peter and Mason, Jim, (2006) *The Ethics of what we Eat* p.249

<sup>8</sup> Laurance, Jeremy, (2008) *The Big Question: Is changing our diet the key to resolving the global food crisis?* <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-wellbeing/health-news/the-big-question-is-changing-our-diet-the-key-to-resolving-the-global-food-crisis-809566.html>

<sup>9</sup> Brazier, Chris, (2008) *Meat's too expensive* <http://www.newint.org/features/2008/12/01/meat/>

<sup>10</sup> Fox, Michael Allen. (2008) *Eating our way to a better future*. Island (Sandy Bay, Tas), no.114, Spring 38-44. p.40

80 percent of all agricultural land in the US is used to raise animals for food. It takes 20,000 litres of water to produce a kilo of meat, but only 200 litres to produce a kilo of wheat. A vegetarian diet requires 1200 litres of water per day. A meat diet requires 16,000 litres. These numbers are difficult to conceive. When we consider the realities involved in the decision to eat meat, consider the steps and imagine the costs required to eat a hamburger:

- Grow tons of grain (tilling, irrigation, etc)
- Transport grain on 18 wheelers to feed mills
- Operate feed mills
- Transport feed to factory farms
- Operate factory farms
- Truck animals to slaughter
- Operate slaughterhouses
- Transport meat to processing plants
- Operate processing plants  
(There is an entirely additional, energy intensive process to create all the packaging needed)
- Transport meat to grocery stores
- Keep meat refrigerated or frozen until ready for use  
(Then there's the waste of all the packaging) <sup>11</sup>

In reality, a decrease or elimination of meat consumption would have a great and beneficial impact on the environment. Animals raised for meat alone consume food equal to the calorie needs of 9 billion people. There are estimates that the world currently produces enough vegetarian food to feed 15 billion people. 1.4 billion people could be fed with the grain and soybeans feed to cattle in the USA alone. <sup>12</sup>

### Health

The high concentration of animals in Factory Farms can easily foster unhygienic conditions, producing high levels of stress on animals' immune systems. If farmers respond with high doses of antibiotics, they may contribute to developing viruses with greater resistance to antibiotics, representing a danger not only to animals but to humans as well. Both avian and swine flu are examples of animal diseases jumping to humans.

### Cruelty

Some people give up meat out of concern for the rights of animals. Modern day farming is far from the idyllic green pastures advertisements like to show us; and often in reality means that intelligent and sensitive animals with the capacity to feel pain are trapped in very confined

---

<sup>11</sup> Ethics and Vegetarianism: Why What We Eat Matters, *Progressive Cognition*, March 05, 2006

<sup>12</sup> Ethics and Vegetarianism: Why What We Eat Matters, *Progressive Cognition*, March 05, 2006

spaces with no room to wander about or perform any of the activities customary to their species, like scratching around in the dirt, which chickens tend to do. This won't change until public pressure increases. As PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) has noted, 'cruelty is acknowledged where profitability ceases.' As Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer said: 'Until he extends the circle of compassion to all living things, man (sic) will not himself find peace.'

'The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than blacks were made for whites, or women for men.' Alice Walker, American author, *The Color Purple*.

'A vegetarian diet is the acid test of humanitarianism.' **Leo Tolstoy**

### Just Reflection

- What is our moral responsibility to respect life, and how far does it extend?
- What is our ethical responsibility for our natural environment?
- What is our ethical responsibility for the animals who share the environment with us?
- And, what is the price of our behaviour on the human race?

### Just Action

Take action by having one meat free day per week, switching to free-range rather than cage eggs, and buying locally to decrease your carbon footprint. For recipe ideas see:

- <http://readysteadycook.ten.com.au/vegetarian-recipes.htm>
- <http://www.veg-soc.org/cms/html/>
- <http://vegetarianweek.com.au/>
- <http://www.organicguide.com/australia/farmers-markets-in-nsw-sydney/>
- <http://www.sydneyfoodfairness.org.au>

### References:

ABC News, *Lifestyle changes can curb climate change* (2008)

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/01/16s/2139349.htm?section=world>

Afshar, Sarah, 'The Ethics of Vegetarianism', April 19, 2007

<http://www.socyberty.com/Lifestyle-Choices/The-Ethics-of-Vegetarianism.22285>

Brazier, Chris, (2008) *Meat's too expensive* <http://www.newint.org/features/2008/12/01/meat/>

Fox, Michael Allen. (2008) *Eating our way to a better future*. Island (Sandy Bay, Tas), no.114, Spring 38-44. p.40

Curtin, Dean, 'Toward an Ecological Ethic of Care.' *Hypathia*, No. 6, spring 1991, pp. 68-71

Ethics and Vegetarianism: Why What We Eat Matters, *Progressive Cognition*, March 05, 2006

Fox, Michael Allen. (2008) *Eating our way to a better future*. Island (Sandy Bay, Tas), no.114, Spring 38-44.

Laurance, Jeremy, (2008) *The Big Question: Is changing our diet the key to resolving the global food crisis?* <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-wellbeing/health-news/the-big-question-is-changing-our-diet-the-key-to-resolving-the-global-food-crisis-809566.html>

Livestock, Environment and Development Initiative, (2006) *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and options* <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/A0701E/A0701E00.pdf>

Singer, Peter and Mason, Jim, *The Ethics of what we Eat*, Text Publishing, 2006

Trivedi, Deepak, 'Ethics and Vegetarianism', <http://www.angelfire.com/celeb/deeprivia/ethics.html>

The University of Chicago, *Study: Vegan Diets healthier for planet, people than meat diets* <http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/06/060413.diet.shtml>

Valle, Luciano, 'Ethics, Christianity and Vegetarianism' <http://www.purifymind.com/EthicsChristianity.htm>