

JustComment

www.erc.org.au

A joint publication of Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education &
The School of Education, Australian Catholic University

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 contribution¹. 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

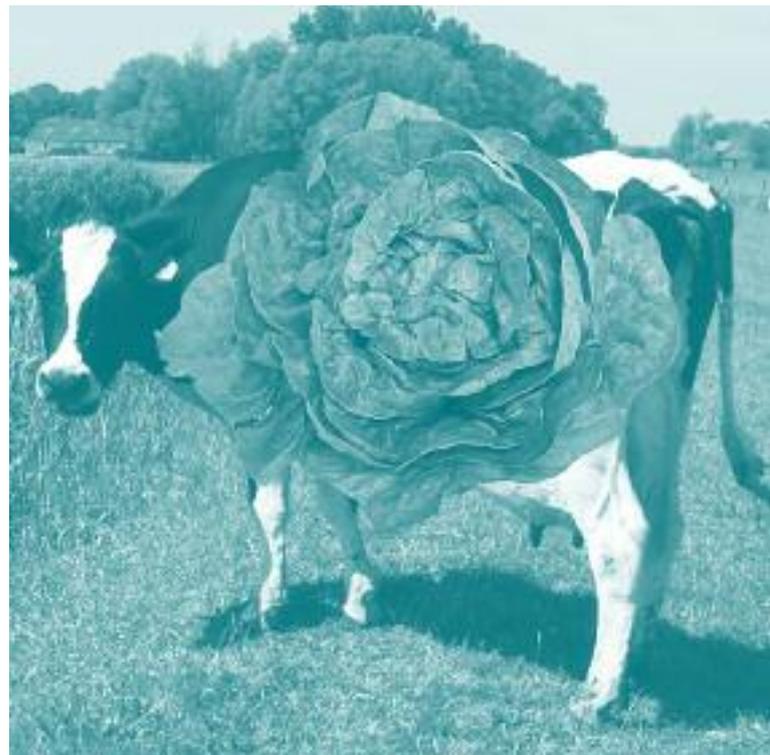
changes, noting that just a kilo of meat can create up 36 kilograms of carbon dioxide, before the energy costs of transporting that meat are even taken into account².

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 from a diet: even cutting back from two hamburgers to one per week can have a significant impact³.

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 bio-diversity⁴.

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.⁵

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)⁶. For instance, pig farms use nearly three kilos of grain for every 500 grams of boneless meat⁷; and 8 kilos of grain to produce one kilo of beef⁸.

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

'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

high temperatures before it even gets to the table⁹. Frances Moore Lappe, in his 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. (ABC Radio National interview on 'Earthbeat,' 20 July, 2002)¹⁰. Reversing, or at least curtailing, this process is even more important given the global food crisis. (See *Just Comment: Food Today... what about tomorrow?*)

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)¹¹

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 alone¹².

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 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.'

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>

Full set of references are on the ERC website



Edmund Rice Centre
AWARENESS • ADVOCACY • ACTION

15 Henley Road, Homebush West
(near Flemington Station)
Phone (02) 8762 4200
Fax (02) 8762 4220
Email johns@erc.org.au
Web www.erc.org.au

 **ACU National**
Australian Catholic University
Brisbane Sydney Canberra Ballarat Melbourne

179 Albert Rd, Strathfield 2135
Phone (02) 9739 2100
Fax (02) 02 9739 2105

This material is the sole property of the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice & Community Education and the School of Education of the Australian Catholic University. Reproduction is not permitted without the permission of these organisations.