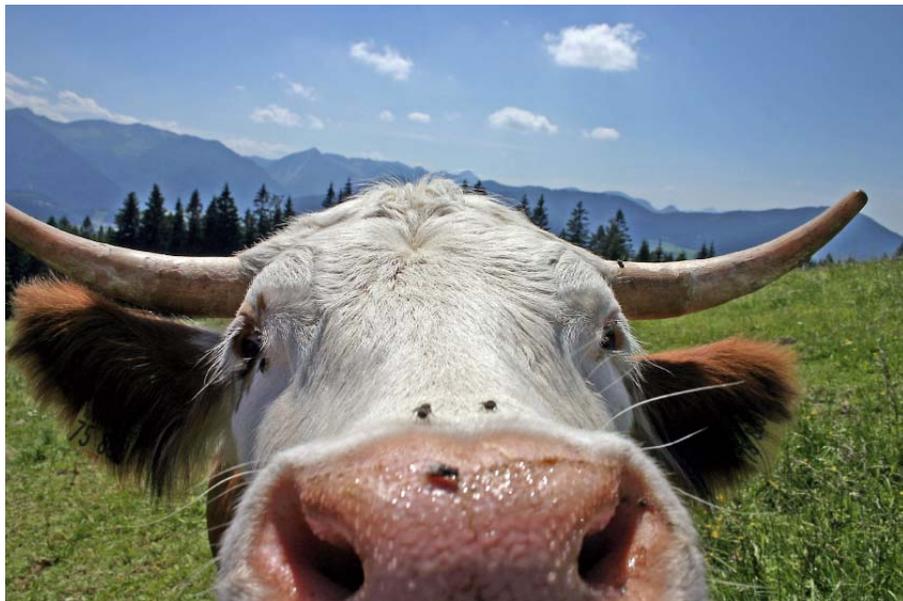


Discussion Paper:
**The Link Between
Meat Production
and Human
Rights.**



By Aloysia Brooks

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Preface

This paper provides a somewhat alternative voice as to the causes of climate change and environmental destruction from a human rights perspective. Throughout this paper, I explore several themes around climate change such as, land degradation, water scarcity and energy resources. Other human rights issues connected to meat production, such as hunger, conflict, violence and health are also examined. In the interests of balance, I investigate the other side of the debate; the human rights considerations of those who are reliant on meat production for their livelihoods and cultural practices.

This research process has reinforced my belief that there are reasons why various Governments have not looked at this issue seriously. Animal production is big business, and corporate interests have played a part in the marketing and mass production of animals for human consumption. However, the negative impact meat production has on the environment is becoming increasingly apparent, not to mention the impacts on our health. This issue can no longer be ignored as we move into another phase of population growth, consumption, destruction of the environment and continued human need.

I would like to add, that although the focus is mainly on the environmental impacts of animal meat production, I acknowledge that there are significant environmental impacts from other animal products, such as dairy and eggs, that have not been explored in this article. I have also excluded a discussion around the ethics of consuming animals that have been raised in torturous conditions. The purpose of this article is to provide someone who is unfamiliar with these concepts, an insight into the environmental impacts of animal production and some of the main issues around consumption.

Read it for yourself, and then decide.

The link between Human Rights and the Production and Consumption of Animal Meat.

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

Albert Einstein (as cited in Marcus, 2001, p.2)

There is no doubt that the world is suffering through an environmental crisis. Climate change, deforestation, water scarcity and the state of resources in relation to population growth, are all impacted directly as a result of the farming and consumption of non-human animal products¹. The world is increasing its overall consumption of meat and seafood (Goodland & Anhang, 2009; World Watch Institute, 2008; McMichael et.al, 2007), and yet there is a food crisis where resources are funnelled into feeding animals so that humans in wealthy countries can consume them (Singer, 2004). This article explores the connections between eating the flesh of animals and environmental destruction which significantly impacts on the rights of every being on the planet.

The world’s output of ‘meat’ has increased up to five times in the second half of the twentieth century (Tudge, 2004, p.1; Worldwatch Institute, 2008, p.10). Over the last seven years, the tonnage of livestock products has increased by twelve percent world-wide (Goodland & Anhang, 2009). There are now twenty two billion farm animals, which include 15 billion chickens and 1.3 billion cattle. In Australia, which is the number one beef and veal exporter, each person consumed an average of thirty seven kilos of beef per year (ABS, 2005). Tudge estimates that by 2050, the world’s livestock population will have grown to the point where the plant food it consumes could feed approximately four billion people, if it wasn’t used for meat production (Tudge, 2004, p.1).

¹From herein, when I refer to animals, I am speaking of the non-human kind.

The link between human rights and the environment

Article 25 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) states that:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care...”

Although contested in many arenas (Zarsky, 2002), the link between human rights and the environment has long been recognised in international law (Sensi, 2007). As recognised by Sensi (2007), pollution of the water and air, loss of biodiversity, desertification and environmental degradation all have a negative impact on human rights (p.27). The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) was the first universal treaty to recognise the dependence on human rights to the state of the environment (Sensi, 2007). Unfortunately, the only legalised treaties that enshrines the right to a healthy environment is the *The African Charter* and the *San Salvador Protocol*. However, it is clear to see that a healthy environment is a pre-condition for the enjoyment of many human rights, such as life, health, and wellbeing (Sensi, 2007). Human rights law provides a means to protect the environment against degradation and pollution that have the effect of limiting human rights obligations².

This being so, the impact of killing animals for meat production on environmental degradation is linked to human rights. When a government ratifies a human rights treaty, they are also creating a legal obligation to ensure that the human rights of its citizens are protected. This means doing everything in their power to protect the rights enshrined, such as the health and wellbeing of the country. Numerous United Nations bodies have underlined this link as imperative to human rights and have reinforced that human rights are interconnected and interrelated (*Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*,

² of course this is dependent on political will

1993)³. This article is not suggesting that the environment has rights in any sense. However, the rights of living beings, including animals, should be protected overall, and one could argue that the environment is a precondition to enjoying all human rights. To explore this link further, we will investigate the environmental impacts of animal meat production and consumption in depth.

Facts and Figures: Impact of meat production on the Environment

Atmosphere and Climate Change

Climate change is the most serious challenge facing the human race (Annan, 2005, p.24; Steinfeld et.al, 2006, p. xxi). Climate change impacts the temperature of the Earth, which in-turn impacts on the ice caps, rising sea levels which causes flooding, droughts, shifting currents and weather patterns and endless devastating environmental consequences (Rowlands, 2002; Steinfeld et.al, 2006; McMichael et.al, 2007).

There have been many respected scientific researchers who have explored the link between environmental destruction and the production of meat, including the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). In 2006, the FAO released a report entitled '*Livestock's Long Shadow*' which outlined many concerns in relation to the production and consumption of beef. The research found that the livestock sector accounted for eighteen percent of the world's total greenhouse gas emissions measured in CO² equivalent (Steinfeld et.al, 2006, p. xxi). Similarly, McMichael et.al (2007) found that one fifth of the world's greenhouse gas emissions are attributable to agricultural activity, especially livestock production, which is the equivalent of twenty percent of global total emissions (p.1253). Although there are different numbers ranging from eighteen to twenty two percent, the consensus is that the contribution to global emissions is greater than that of every day transport of everyone on the globe (Ogino et. al., 2007; McMichael et al., 2007; Steinfeld et.al, 2006).

³ See Kofi Annan, *In Larger Freedom*, Goal 7: Environmental Sustainability where he discusses the environmental crisis and the impact on human wellbeing now and in the future.

Recently, Goodland and Anhang (2009) concluded that the above figures have been “vastly underestimated”, and that the life-cycle and supply chain of domestic animals raised for food account for “**at least half of all human-caused GHG’s [Greenhouse Gas Emissions]**”(p.11). Based on their analysis, they believe that if we were to adopt a plant based diet devoid of all animal products, we would be able to reverse climate change (Goodland & Anhang, 2009).

Deforestation has also been a consequence of meat production (Goodland and Anhang, 2009). Forests have been destroyed to make way for the grazing of animals to be used for human consumption. Over the past twenty five years, approximately half of Central America’s rainforests have been cleared, largely to provide beef to North Americans (Rowlands, 2002). Deforestation has led to the extinction of species, erosion of topsoil, and flooding. But the most devastating impact of deforestation is the release of massive amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. The livestock sector accounts for nine percent of anthropogenic CO² emissions which derives especially from deforestation due to land use changes, such as expansion of pastures or arable land for feedcrops (Steinfeld et. al, 2006).

The livestock sector emits thirty percent of anthropogenic methane, sixty five percent of anthropogenic nitrous oxide, the great majority from manure, and almost two thirds (sixty four percent) of anthropogenic ammonia which contributes to acid rain and acidification of ecosystems (Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.xxi).

Biodiversity is affected by the expansion of pastures and rangeland degradation attributed to the livestock industry. Overfishing for livestock feed has had a strong impact on the biodiversity of marine ecosystems (FAO, 2006, p.273). Deforestation has also contributed to habitat loss for many species, especially in Latin America. Livestock now occupy vast areas which were once home to wildlife.

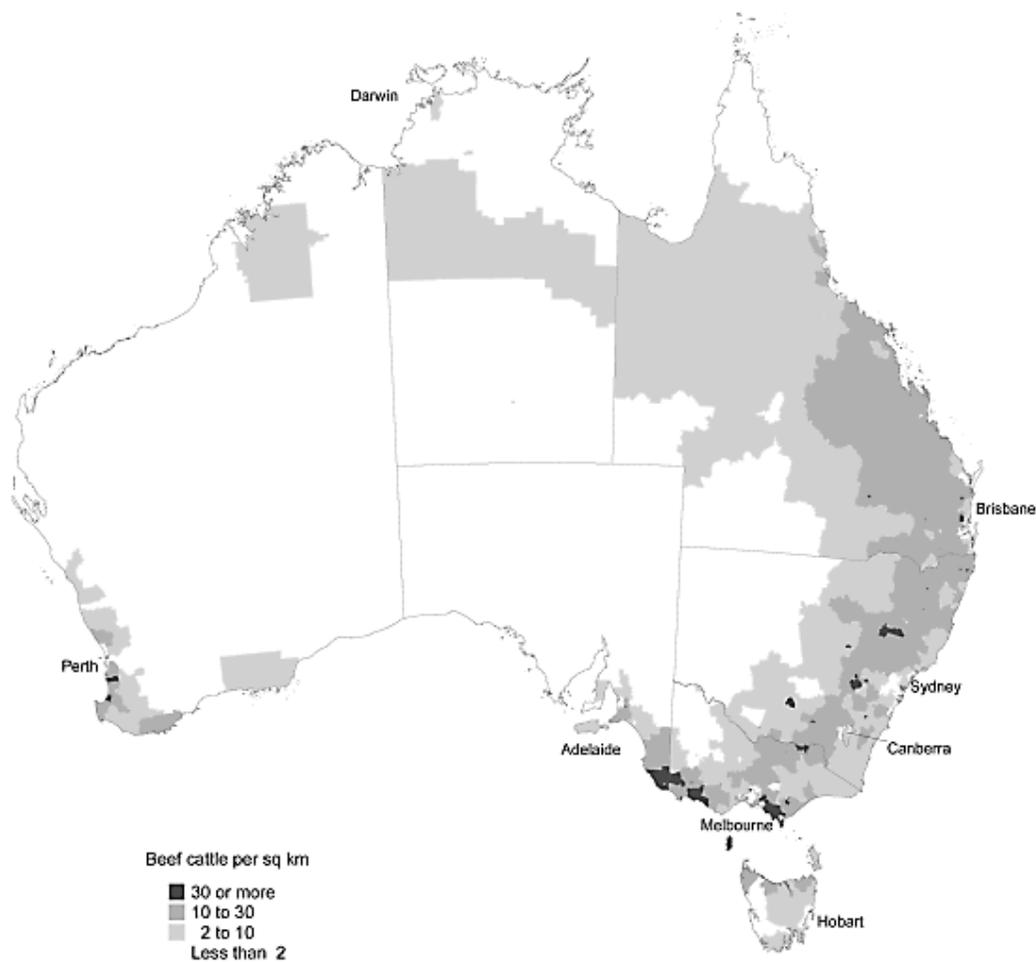
Weather plays a major role in the production of food (Davis, 2006). The contribution of pollution from animal products is effecting weather patterns and therefore affecting the right of people to adequate food.

All of these practices which are engaged to produce and rear animals for meat contributes to the intensification of climactic changes and environmental degradation. A report by Schwartz and Randall (2003) for the Pentagon suggested that global warming proves a **greater risk to the world than terrorism** and could lead to catastrophic droughts, riots and famines (as cited in Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.6).

Land Degradation

The farming of animals, especially livestock accounts for twenty six percent of the ice-free terrestrial surface of the planet (FAO, 2006; Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.xxi). One of the biggest problems is the amount of land which is dedicated to feedcrops (FAO, 2006). Presently, the amount of land dedicated to production of food for animals to be killed for human consumption is thirty three percent of total arable land. As Steinfeld et.al. (2006) point out, all livestock production accounts for *seventy percent of all agricultural land* and *thirty percent of the total land surface on the planet* (p.xxi).

Beef Cattle Distribution in Australia.



(ABS, 2005)

About twenty percent of the world's pastures have been degraded, mostly through overgrazing, compaction and erosion created by livestock. Flannery (2005) suggests that the 22 million hectares of arable land in Australia has degraded and is in need of soil restoration (p.367). Because additional land for cultivation has been severely limited, the future of agricultural production has come and will come from intensification of land that is already cropped or grazed (Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.5). This being so, the amount of food directly put in to feeding animals for human use needs to be looked at critically.

'Animals that we eat are the nutritional equivalent of middlemen. We put things in-protein, carbohydrates, iron, calcium and so on-and we get out a whole lot less than we put in. This means that raising animals for food is an extremely inefficient use of land.'
(Rowlands, 2002, p.202)

Water

“The water that goes into a 1000 pound steer would float a destroyer.”

(Newsweek as cited in Rowlands, 2004, p.203)

It is not only land that is used inefficiently for meat production. Fresh water, the ever increasing scarce and depleting resource, is also used to excess for the production of animal products. It is estimated that sixty four percent of the world's population is expected to live in 'water stressed' basins by the year 2025 (Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.xxii). This is a very real and urgent problem. The livestock industry has much to answer for considering it uses over eight percent of global human water use, mostly for irrigation of feedcrops. Singer (2002) has noted that more than half of all water consumed in the United States goes to livestock (p.167). An example to put this into perspective; it takes 500 litres to farm a kilo of potatoes, 900 litres for a kilo of wheat, approximately 2000 for rice or soy beans, 3 500 for a single chicken or, *100 000 litres for just one kilo of beef* (Tudge, 2004, p.1).

Water pollution due to meat production has also become a serious issue. The major sources of water pollution today are from animal wastes, antibiotics and hormones injected into animals for greater meat production, chemicals from tanneries, fertilisers and pesticides used for feedcrops, and sediments from eroded pastures (Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.xxii). In the United States, livestock are responsible for fifty five percent of erosion and sediment, thirty seven percent of pesticide use, fifty percent of antibiotic use, and a third of the loads of nitrogen and phosphorous spilled into freshwater resources (Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.xxii).

It is not only pollution that causes a detrimental impact on water supplies. Livestock are also responsible for compacting the soil, reducing filtration, degrading the banks of watercourses, and lowering water tables (Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.xxii). As well as this, deforestation due to meat consumption increases runoff and reduces dry season flows.

Water pollution and ammonia have affected the quality and health of aquatic life (FAO, 2006). The amount of toxins which run into waterways has increased due to non-human animal meat production. Fecal matter and antibiotics find their way into the water where fish are found. In turn people are eating contaminated fish which causes major health problems. For example, the demand for cheap fish has become an issue for the Togeans whose livelihoods have depended on fishing, but the water is now contaminated by Cyanide due to fishing practices which seek to maximise the catch (Lowe, 2000).

Energy/Resources

Australia's population now sits at 22, 038, 731 (ABS, 2009). Flannery estimates that Australia only has the capacity to feed between 20-30 million (Flannery, 2005, p.368). One of the reasons for this is that Australian's are so dependent on cattle, sheep and pigs for their meat. Flannery (2005) has suggested that if Australia wanted to continue to eat 'meat' considering our population demands and environmental sustainability, we would need to start eating kangaroos, goats, feral pigs, rabbits, wild dogs, horses and emus (p.398). Of course, the alternative of a plant based diet sounds like a more advantageous and appealing option for everyone involved.

With the growth of population comes the increased demand for livestock. By 2025, the FAO estimates that the world wide number of livestock will double (Goodland and Anhang, 2009). This of course means an increase in greenhouse gas emissions and environmental destruction.

The amount of energy consumed to produce meat is enormous (Rowlands, 2002). An issue especially pressing, is the energy and resources allocated to factory farming, then slaughter, transporting of carcasses and the refrigeration (Goodland & Anhang, 2009). Considering our rapidly depleting reserves of fossil fuels and other natural energy resources, the energy used to produce animal meat could be better managed to minimise environmental impact and maximise healthy food production.

Food Production and Hunger

“...the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger...”

Article 11 (2) of the ICESCR

“It’s going to be almost impossible to feed future generations the kind of diet we have now in western Europe and north America.”

Anders Berntell from Stockholm Water Institute

(as cited in Kirby, 2004)

As Rowlands (2002) puts it, a bull is, in effect, a protein converter (p.201). In 2002, a total of six hundred and seventy million tonnes of cereals were fed to livestock, representing approximately a third of the global cereal harvest (Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.12). Another three hundred and fifty million tonnes of protein rich processing by-products are used as feed, including brans, oilcakes and fishmeal (Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.12). It takes twenty one pounds of vegetable protein to feed a calf to produce only one pound of animal protein that is then available for humans to eat (Singer, 2002, p.165; Rowlands, 2002, p. 202). So for every pound of cattle protein, we could have had twenty one pounds of vegetable protein instead and fed many more people. More than ninety percent of what is put into the bull is lost. Other animals are not quite as ‘inefficient’, as Rowlands (2002) puts it. Pigs, sheep and chickens work out to be a conversion ratio of around ten to one; that is ten pounds of vegetable protein to every pound of animal flesh (Rowlands, 2002, p.202).

Peter Singer (2003) puts forward this analogy. If we have one acre of land that is used to grow high-protein plant food, such as beans, we will reap between three hundred and five hundred pounds of protein from the acre. Comparatively, the land could be used to grow a crop that will be fed to animals that we feed, and then kill for food. The protein will then be forty to fifty five pounds of protein from the acre (p.165).

Of course protein is not the only nutrient which plants can provide. The total amount of calories produced by plant foods compared to non-human animal foods always shows plant foods to come out on top. For example, one crop of oats or corn produces about twenty times more calories per acre as beef (Singer, 2002, p.166). Another myth perpetuated by the meat and dairy industry is the amount of iron that meat can provide. An acre of broccoli produces sixteen times the amount of iron as an acre of cattle and five times as much calcium as milk (Singer, 2002, p.166).

“Famines are wars over the right to existence.”

(Davis, 1996, p.56)

The point of all of these figures is to demonstrate the amount of food and nutrition that could be going to hungry people compared to feeding animals so we can eat them to satisfy taste rather than nutritional requirements. The fact is, the eating of animal flesh is making some people rich, and causing the suffering of humans and animals everywhere. We are presently in a food crisis (FAO, 2008). Realistically, stopping meat consumption will not solve the problem of world hunger as there are many political and economic factors involved in this issue. However, stopping the consumption of animal products would be a major step forward, not only to feed hungry people, but also in overcoming unnecessary suffering of animals. In 1974, a study by Lester Brown of the Overseas Development Council found that if Americans were to reduce their meat consumption by ten percent for only one year, it would mean that there would be at least an extra twelve million tonnes of grain for human consumption (Singer, 2002). This is enough to feed sixty million people!

“Every human being has the inherent right to life.”

Article 6, UDHR.

The food wasted due to animal production in affluent nations would be enough to end hunger and malnutrition across the globe (assuming equal distribution) (Singer, 2002, p. 166). There are *923 million people* worldwide who are undernourished and *843 million*

people are living in chronic hunger (FAO, 2008). The World Health Organisation calls malnutrition the ‘silent emergency’, and says that it contributes to the deaths of at least half of the 10.4 million child deaths that occur every year (Kirby, 2004). There are many reasons for this, including the rising price of food commodities due to demand for biofuels and the rising price of oil, distribution problems, climate change and changes in agricultural policies of OECD countries. However, even the United Nations FAO attributes part of the problem to livestock production and feedcrops (FAO, 2008). We have no excuse to conveniently put this issue to the side simply because we enjoy the taste of meat. This *is* a human rights issue. People in other countries are dying from hunger and malnutrition because we prefer to ignore the bad habits of affluent nations.

Davis (1996) discusses the political ecology of famine and points out the link between the politics of wealthy countries that influences the human rights of those in developing countries. What is of particular importance in relation to this article, is the way that the mass production of meat has impacted on the poorest people. The ‘meat industry’ is run and sustained by wealthy nations whose main objective is to maximise wealth and to satiate wealthy people’s taste for flesh. As this article has indicated, the impact of meat consumption on the environment is devastating. Poverty and famine is just another way that Western countries keep developing countries in a state of political reliance and submission. The millions who die of malnutrition has ultimately been a policy choice by the rich and the powerful (Davis, 1996, p.55). The main losers in the environmental crisis are those from developing nations who do not have the resources to match those in wealthy nations. This in turn impacts on basic human rights.

Conflict

Environmental degradation has been linked with war and conflict. The Southern African Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (Biggs et. al, 2004) discusses the relationship between ecological stress and social conflict. It suggests that conflict may indeed cause environmental degradation, but it also might trigger a conflict due to competing for dwindling resources such as land for cattle, woodfuel shortages and water scarcity. The report outlines many examples where faction fighting over scarce land for cattle production has led to killings (Biggs et. al, 2004). Examples were also given where major ecological problems have gone hand in hand with recent violent conflict in the Congo, Burundi and Rwanda.

This connection suggests that the consumption of animal products is connected to human rights issues on many levels and as far reaching as one can possibly imagine. If we take control of environmental degradation, and a good starting point would be slowing down the consumption of meat, the impact around the globe would be phenomenal.

Impact of Meat consumption directly on human beings

Health

“...the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health..”

Article 12 (i) of the ICESCR

Environmental degradation impacts the health and wellbeing of all human beings in a number of ways both directly and indirectly (Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.6). For example, an indirect effect would be the exposure of humans to infectious diseases due to climate change. Diseases such as Dengue Fever and Malaria are very sensitive to climactic changes as well as Schistosmiasis and Bilharzia which are carried by water snails and affected by changing water flows (Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.6). The World Resources Report of 1999 emphasises that the burden of these environmental related diseases are borne disproportionately by the poor in both developed and developing nations (Steinfeld et. al, 2006, p.6).

There have been increases of ‘diseases of affluence’ (Singer, 2003; Marcus, 2001; Ayres, 1999). Worldwide there are approximately 1.1 billion overweight people, matching the number who are malnourished (Singer, 2003). The China Project was a study which looked at diet and lifestyle in a comprehensive way. Scientists looked at the health and wellbeing of 800 million Chinese citizens. It was then picked up by scientists from England, France and the US. A total of 10 200 people were surveyed about their eating habits, lifestyle, exercise habits etc. There were many striking findings in this study. For example, common cancers tended to occur in more urban areas where more meat, oil and animal protein has been consumed (Marcus, 2001). Dr Campbell, one of the researchers noted, *“the project results also suggest that even small amounts of animal products in the diet produces significant increases in disease.”*(Campbell as cited in Marcus, 2001, pp.29-30)

The World Health Organisation has found that there is a link between eating animal products and an increase in cancers such as colorectal cancer and breast cancer (Ayres, 1999). Cardiovascular disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol are all attributed to eating a diet that is high in animal fats. Some nutritionists have claimed that most people in wealthy countries don't need as much protein as they are getting from meat, and that it is in fact, contributing to obesity (Ayres, 1999).

With the rise of the mass consumption of meat, the demand to produce bigger animals at a faster rate has seen the introduction of new threats to human health, not to mention the abhorrent suffering of animals. In a particularly cruel process, the flesh of the animals is now being pumped full of genetically modified organisms, hormones, and antibiotics. The full effects of these new chemicals on humans are yet to be realised. However, many studies have suggested that hormones, antibiotics and genetically modified foods pose a threat to human health and wellbeing (Directorate General for Health and Consumers, 1999; Edward, 2008; Grocott, 2003) Antibiotics can cause severe reactions including death. Also, more resistant forms of viruses are developing which pose a serious threat to humans (Avian Flu).

Wellbeing and Violence

In relation to human wellbeing, both spiritually and physically, philosophers, religious leaders and human rights activists such as Mahatma Ghandi, have argued that refraining from consuming 'meat' contributes to the wellbeing of all beings because of the commitment to peace and non-violence. The link between violence towards non-human animals and humans is distinct. Studies investigating domestic violence have shown that there is an overlap between child abuse and animal cruelty (Bailey, 2009). Similarly, a 2005 study found that during adolescence, animal cruelty has been associated with other violent behaviours such as bullying, engaging in violence towards siblings and other anti-social behaviour (Goodney-Lea, 2005).

At the very basic level, killing an animal is a violent act, as it would be killing a human being. The animal cries, is fearful, frets for its loved ones, struggles for survival, and suffered pain before it eventually died. Although very few of us actually have to kill an animal to eat it, the desensitisation of the killing of other beings, whether human or animal, is of concern. As far as I am aware, there are no major conclusive studies which provide a concrete answer to the desensitisation issue (Chalmers, 2008). However, many philosophers and religious leaders have made this connection. For example, Hinduism is one philosophy that attributes the act of eating of meat to violence. It is believed that the killing of the animal, and way in which the animal died has a direct bearing on ourselves and wellbeing. Hindu's believe that we absorb the 'himsa' or violence and that this in turn affects how we live our lives.

The choice not to partake of animal products results from empathy and compassion towards other beings, and therefore a commitment to non-violence. Non-violent activists work to promote peace and undertake consciousness-raising activities to promote peaceful conflict resolution, justice and equality. For vegans, meaning those who refrain from consuming or using any product that is animal derived, this consciousness extends to non-human animals as well as humans. One could argue that a higher level of

wellbeing is reached by not contributing to the pain and suffering of any animal, be it human or non-human.

The Other Side of the Story

As always, there is another side to this story. Although many people are turning to vegetarianism⁴, meat production and consumption is a part of everyday life for most people. Article 2 of the UDHR outlines the right to freedom of opinion. This being so, this paper will now explore some of the arguments for the production and consumption of meat.

The argument for eating animal meat

Some say that eating meat is a natural part of the food chain. However, it seems that the game has been changed with the introduction of factory farming and chemical laden animals that are served on the plates of millions every night. Animals are no longer the free roaming spirits that were hunted during the time of our ancestors. There is no reason why human beings need to consume meat to stay healthy, especially not in developed countries where there is access to plant based sources of nutrition.

On the other hand, there are some isolated communities who have no choice but to eat 'meat' for subsistence. There are many places where access to nutrient rich soil is unavailable to farm grain. Also, the isolation can mean a reliance on crops which are affected by weather patterns, such as drought or flooding. Although I would not personally eat another animal, I am by no means making a moral judgement on whether those affected should eat an animal to survive, if they have no choice. Although, I must reinforce that we do have the resources to distribute plant based food to **all** of the world's poor. But this is a political issue, not about individual blame. The point is, the vast majority of us, actually, all of us in Western countries, **do** have the choice in eating a plant based diet.

⁴ A recent poll by Sanatarium found that many more Australians are turning to a vegetarian diet due to health and environmental concerns. ('Aussies Veg Out', Sun Herald, 5th October 2008)

Livelihoods

There is a major reliance on meat production to the livelihoods of many of the world's poor. This coincides with the right to work (see Article 4 of ICESCR). The livestock sector generates approximately 1.4 percent of the world's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (FAO, 2006, p.268). The livestock sector contributes to the support, income and employment of 987 million poor people (living under US\$2 day) and communities in rural areas, which is the equivalent of 36 percent of the world's poor (FAO, 2006, p.268). Livestock rearing is an accessible economic activity in poorer countries because it does not require any formal education, large amounts of capital and often no land ownership (FAO, 2006, p.268). Raising livestock gives poorer communities the ability to make a living which is a right under Article 7 (ii) and Article 11 of the ICESCR and article 25 of the UDHR. Any attempt to tackle the issues associated with meat consumption must take into consideration the human rights of those who will be affected. Viable alternatives must be explored as an option where animal farmers can earn an income in another way. This strategy has been successfully used in the case of foresters who depend on logging for their livelihoods. This is not impossible, there is another way.

Culture and Taste

There is also the socio-cultural role of meat consumption and animals within different societies. In some developing countries, the ownership of livestock is seen as a sign of wealth and prestige, or as a method of payment, such as a dowry or settlement. In some communities, the consumption of animal products is important to religious activities. This coincides with the cultural rights enshrined in the ICESCR (see article 15(a)).⁵ Education may play a role in this respect by shifting the culturally engrained notion that animals are here primarily for our use, rather than realising that they are thinking, feeling and social beings that deserve to live free lives. Cultural practices change over time, and awareness of negative outcomes lead to change.

Some people just plainly like the taste of meat. However, when liking the taste of something causes the immeasurable suffering of people, the environment and animals, can we as a global community sit back and not address the consequences? If there weren't corporate interests involved in the production of meat products, do you still think that humans would still be consuming as much meat as they presently do considering the impacts? There are many soy based meat alternatives currently on the market that can take the place of meat in any recipe if taste is the only concern.

⁵ There has been some tension in regards to cultural practices and the impact on human rights. For example, cultural acts which physically hurt someone (eg. female genital mutilation) are still considered breaches of human rights law, even if the group claims that it was done for cultural reasons. This tension is applicable in regards to the mostly culturally accepted practice of consuming meat. Should we still allow the suffering of humans and animals due to meat consumption to continue just because it is an accepted cultural practice?

Conclusion

No matter what our ethics are around eating animals, the impact on the environment is beyond debate. If the environment is affected, so are the human rights of everyone, especially the poor. If we are to ignore the impact of meat production and consumption then we must also ignore the impacts of logging, dams and mining as they also have a direct impact on human rights. This article has explored some of the many issues surrounding the production and consumption of non human animals. It is beyond question that the atmosphere and climate change, land degradation and water scarcity are all affected due to factory farming practices and the amount of animals produced for human consumption. Food production and famine is one of the most pressing crisis' in relation to human rights. As aforementioned, there are 923 million people worldwide who are undernourished (FAO, 2008). And the food wasted due to animal production could end hunger and malnutrition across the globe (Singer, 2002, p.166). The inadvertent contribution to conflict in relation to resources must also be addressed, as environmental issues have been linked to conflict and resource wars in developing countries.

To conclude, yes, there is a link between the production and consumption of animals and human rights. The production of animal products is something that must be looked at seriously if we are to tackle environmental problems, and even issues surrounding violence in an holistic sense. What must be reinforced is that this is not just an issue for those who chose to live an 'alternative lifestyle'. This is something that everyone can do to contribute to human rights; and all you have to do is leave one thing off your plate.

“But whence is it that a certain ravenousness and frenzy drives you in these happy days to pollute yourselves with blood, since you have such an abundance of things necessary for your subsistence? Why do you belie the earth as unable to maintain you?”

Plutarch (c.46-120, Tract 1)

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Relevant Treaties and Protocols

African Charter of Human Rights

Convention on the Rights of the Child

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

San Salvador Protocol

Universal Declaration of Human Rights