

Vegetarianism

Our Best Hope for the Planet

BY E.M. FAY

Vegetarians have long been considered fair game for jokesters – often relegated to the same frivolous category as UFO believers or the Flat Earth Society. Some people who don't know the facts about vegetarianism behave as though eating a plant-based diet were some newfangled fad, suitable only for celebrities or impossibly ascetic types. This, despite the fact that



vegetarianism has been a natural way of life for people worldwide for millennia, and it is a far more sustainable mode of eating than the meat-heavy diet consumed by the average American and others today.

Fortunately, this ignorance is being defeated on a number of fronts by better education regarding vegetarian living; easier access to a wider variety of fruits, vegetables, and other edible plants; and the promulgation by some imaginative chefs of a vast array of delicious vegetarian recipes.

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Health Factor

The health benefits of "going veggie" are widely known and largely agreed upon, with many mainstream medical entities firmly on board. No less an authority than the venerable Mayo Clinic states that, "A plant-based diet, which emphasizes fruits and vegetables, grains, beans and legumes, and nuts, is rich in fiber, vitamins and other nutrients.....People who eat only plant-based foods — aka vegetarians — generally eat fewer calories and less fat, weigh less, and have a lower risk of heart disease than non-vegetarians do."

www.mayoclinic.com/health/meatless-meals/my00752

Even the USDA, notorious for turning a blind eye to the animal abuse that is rife in the meat farming industry, admits in an article entitled, "Plant-Based Diet Is A Healthy Choice," that

"Vegetables, fruits and other plant foods are rich sources of antioxidant nutrients (like vitamins C and E, beta-carotene and other carotenoids) that may protect our cells from damage by cancer-causing agents, halting the earliest processes that lead to cancer. In addition, they contain thousands of phytochemicals (natural substances in plants, like indoles, isoflavones and polyphenols) that appear to protect against cancer in a variety of ways."

www.ars.usda.gov/News/docs.htm?docid=9246

The myth that you can't achieve a good balance of essential nutrients without eating animal-based products can be put to rest for once and all. One only needs to do a modest amount of research into which foods possess essential elements for a healthy diet — and that's no more difficult than following the changing edicts that conventional nutritionists announce from time to time. From the "7 Basic Food Groups," that Baby Boomers grew up with, depicted in the shape of a wheel, to the more current Food Pyramid. Government agencies tout such models, hand-in-hand with specific agricultural lobbyists (Milk Boards, National Pork Producers Council, etc.). Although the pyramid is slightly different from the 1950s' wheel, both insist on including meat, poultry, and fish in our daily regimen.

Replacing meat protein with plant-based equivalents is often of especial interest to novice vegetarians. Even though adults do not require as much protein as growing children, there are numerous non-animal sources to fulfill anyone's daily requirement, including whole grains, beans, lentils, legumes, nuts, and seeds. Some of these come in a wide variety of sub-sets, and some, like soy, can be used in many forms.

In addition to the above-noted health benefits, there is the specter of multiple food-borne illnesses and pandemics caused by unsanitary and unethical animal-raising practices. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy ("mad cow disease"), Avian Flu (H5N1), SARS, and swine flu are just a few of the diseases that affect livestock and, eventually, humans, because of inherently cruel and unsanitary methods of keeping animals enslaved for our consumption. The over-use of antibiotics, meant to minimize illness in food animals, has also harmed humans, as our bodies become resistant from ingesting so many drugs via the animals we eat.

Improving our health is but one motivation to go vegetarian, however. Scientific data amassed over recent decades reveals the enormous stress we are placing on all ecological systems simply because of eating meat.

Global Warming

Breeding animal species for human consumption requires that we clear vast tracts of land for cattle and sheep to graze on. This destroys the habitat of countless other species of wildlife. The four main species that humans choose to eat — cows, pigs, sheep, and chickens — themselves need to consume massive amounts of food and water. Further, they produce mountains of waste, and emit methane and other greenhouse gases. These gases, we now know, contribute to global warming more than all forms of transportation (cars, planes, etc.) combined! A 2006 UN report, "Livestock's Long Shadow," estimates that livestock causes 18% of annual greenhouse gas emissions. And a more recent report by other analysts shows livestock and attendant by-products accounting for 51% of GHG (greenhouse gas). www.worldwatch.org/node/6294.

Land Use and Scarce Resources

With the world human population at over 7 billion now and on course to exceed 10 billion by 2050, there simply isn't enough room to continue to raise animals for food. With a billion or more people suffering from hunger, livestock production means the majority of the world's crops are unavailable for starving humans in order to feed animals that more well-off humans eat. And, although "developed" countries eat more meat by far, there is a worrying trend in "developing" nations towards emulation.

A shocking 30% of the non-frozen land on Earth is devoted to livestock and their feed requirements. Overgrazing of land leads to infertility and flooding. And deforestation of the planet, especially in the once vast tropical rainforests, has not only negatively affected the global climate — causing unpredictable weather patterns, an increase in the number and severity of disastrous storms — but has wiped out whole populations of plant and animal species that once thrived and provided invaluable ecological diversity, as well as sources of medicines vital to human health.

Even more alarming is the amount of water used in the raising of livestock. Entire rivers have been diverted to cattle facilities. The Colorado River has become a mere trickle. As droughts across the globe become more prevalent and long lasting, many scientists are predicting the near-inevitability that potable water will be insufficient to sustain life on Earth as we know it, and will lead to wars such as those currently fought over oil.

Add to this the wholesale contamination of land, sea, and air by giant agribusinesses' use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, harmful food additives, and the expulsion of animal waste into rivers, streams, and oceans, and we can see that continuing a meat-eating culture is literally poisoning the planet.

The Humane Factor

Factory farms are today responsible for 99% per cent of American meat production. Jonathan Safran Foer's 2009 book, *Eating Animals*, is only one of

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many well-researched and sickening exposés of the heartless factory-farming industry. Far from being the jolly, pastoral places depicted in illustrations of the Little Golden Books from our childhood, modern “farms” are horrific places of incalculable animal suffering. As Foer put it, animals live in “overcrowded, stressful, feces-infested conditions and are routinely fed antibiotics with every meal to prevent sickness.” Every piece of chicken, pork, beef, or lamb that we put into our mouths is the direct result of causing pain, fear, and sorrow to a formerly living creature.

One person explained his now-well-known conversion to vegetarianism by describing a typical Sunday dinner at his country home. He and his family were sitting at the table enjoying the charming sight outside their window of young lamb’s gamboling in the grass. It suddenly dawned on them that these adorable youngsters were the same form of life as had provided the leg of lamb they were dining upon! This was a true epiphany for Paul McCartney and his wife, Linda. They forswore meat eating from that day forward. The McCartneys became staunch advocates of the vegetarian lifestyle, and Linda was later renowned for her vegetarian cookbooks and product line.

As Paul said in a Guardian interview in 2010, “When Linda and I brought our family up not eating meat, the original reason was our deep love of animals.”

As for figuring out vegetarian recipes, McCartney added, “Once we got the idea that many cultures’ cuisines contained meat-free dishes, we began to explore various options and soon found ourselves with a huge repertoire of healthy, and most importantly, great tasting food.”

Historical-Philosophical Rationale for Vegetarianism

Although purposeful avoidance of eating flesh may originally have been for ritualistic reasons, and has very ancient origins, the “normal” use of a fleshless diet is thought to have begun around the middle of the first millennium BC. Vegetarianism appeared simultaneously in India and the Eastern Mediterranean region during this period, likely the result of an intellectual-philosophical awakening. Pythagoras and his followers, for example, believed in the kinship of all animals, and therefore espoused human benevolence towards them, which precluded exploitation of animals for food. Plato, Plutarch, and other Greek philosophers recommended vegetarian diets as part of their search for cosmic harmony. In India, Buddhists and Jains refused to kill animals for food, holding that humans should not cause harm to any sentient being. The fact that they considered all creatures to be sentient reveals the sophistication of their ethical thought processes.

The principles of humanitarianism that were integral to the Age of Enlightenment in Western Europe

included concern for the suffering of animals. Voltaire, Shelley, and Thoreau were just a few luminaries who advocated and/or practiced vegetarianism. Later on, Tolstoy and George Bernard Shaw joined their ranks. For many such advocates, this humane form of nutrition was part of an integrated approach to living a generally wholesome and ethical life. It may well be that the current resurgence of vegetarianism signals a return to the enlightened principles and practices of our wise forebears.

In any case, given the clearly manifested and irreparable damage being done to our entire planetary eco-system by the raising of animals for slaughter and human consumption, it is undeniable that all species – plant and animal – have a far better chance of survival if vegetarianism gains a stronger foothold worldwide. Even if some humans do not acknowledge the moral imperative of treating all animals with respect and kindness as they deserve, the instinct for self-preservation alone dictates an immediate need for widespread change to a plant-based diet.