

Why Eat Meat?

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You are what you eat. This age-old adage is heard often throughout one's life. Drink your milk, it will make you grow tall. Eat your meat, you want to be strong don't you? The meat industry has put a great deal of time and money into selling the need for meat and dairy products in the daily diet. They begin their marketing techniques early in life so one is well informed of the need for their products, as seen in the National Livestock and Meat Board 1974-1975 Report: "The 37 million elementary and 15 million high school students in the United States constitute a special Meat Board audience" (qtd. in Robbins 126). Well, the play is drawing to an end and it's time to for the audience to see the truth behind these dietary habits.

Today's society is consuming an excessive amount of animal-based foods and the repercussions are far greater than perhaps most realize. The choice of a vegetarian diet is becoming increasingly significant as the myth of the meat-laden diet is exposed.

The detrimental effect on an individual's health is well documented with medical authorities. "Cardiovascular disease is still the number one killer in the United States . . . Today, the average American male eating a meat-based diet has a 50 percent chance of dying from heart disease. His risk drops to 15 percent if he cuts out meat; it goes to 4 percent if he cuts out meat, dairy and eggs" (Dworkin 90). This results from the high levels of saturated fat and cholesterol found in animal-based foods, which are not found in produce. Studies show that when patients diagnosed with heart disease adopt a vegetarian diet more than 70% recover (EarthSave, Health 1).

In hearings conducted to determine the health effects of the American diet Dr. Gio B. Gori, the Deputy Director of the National Cancer Institute's Division of Cancer Cause and Prevention, testified that the main factor in the diet which leads to cancer is the consumption of meat and fat. Dr. Mark Hegstead, a nutritional scientist from Harvard University called as an expert witness claimed: "I think it is clear that the American diet is indicted as a cause of coronary heart disease. And it is pertinent, I think, to point out the same diet is now found (guilty) in terms of many forms of cancer: breast cancer, cancer of the colon and others" (qtd. in Robbins 252).

There has been over 50 years of study proving that over consumption of protein is the most important cause of osteoporosis. "Animal proteins, including milk, make the blood acidic, and to balance that condition, the body pulls calcium from bones" (Dworkin 91).

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Without the high risk of fatal diseases, the average life span increases. The cultures in the world with the longest life expectancy are primarily vegetarians. Diseases aside, the vegetarian diet increases energy, well being and on average those that follow it are slimmer. Therefore, from a health perspective the choice seems clear. But don't expect the family doctor to advise on these matters. In their four years of medical school the average physician receives less than three hours of training in nutrition and only 30 of the 125 U.S. schools make that course mandatory (EarthSave, Health 2; Robbins 150).

Now, take a step back and look at the larger picture. The ecological effects of a high meat diet are not something to ignore. They are becoming increasingly more relevant and definitive on the welfare of the planet.

The fertile land, upon which the food is grown, animal or vegetable, is a necessity. The amount of grain needed to support feeding the livestock that the population's diet demands is steadily destroying the nutrient-rich topsoil. American topsoil once covered 21 inches on the land's surface; today there is about six (Robbins 357). Furthermore, 70% of this grain is then fed to livestock. Brian Halweil of the Worldwatch Institute reports, "If each American reduced his or her meat consumption by only 5 percent, roughly equivalent to eating one less dish of meat each week, 7.5 million tons of grain would be saved, enough to feed 25 million people-roughly the number estimated to go hungry in the United States each day" (3). The scale remains similar on a global level. If the grain was fed directly to the world's population, it's easy to see its effect on world hunger.

The livestock industry, in addition to being an inefficient means of food distribution, challenges the supply of many natural resources. Consider this: "It takes 2,500 gallons of water, 12 pounds of grain, 35 pounds of topsoil and the energy equivalent of one gallon of gasoline to produce one pound of feedlot beef" (EarthSave, Planet 1). Not only does this industry consume large quantities of resources but they are the major contributor to the pollution of U.S. rivers, as that is where most of the animal waste ends up. It's shocking when one understands the massive quantity being discussed. Brian Halweil claims the United States livestock is responsible for 130 times the amount of waste in comparison to humans (3). For example, "Circle 4 Farms in Milford, Utah, which raises 2.5 million pigs every year, creates more waste than the entire city of Los Angeles. . . . the nation's factory farms, collectively produce 2 billion tons of manure" (Dworkin 91).

The pesticides used while growing the feed are also creating problems. A large amount seeps into the waterways. The fish in the ocean are becoming unsafe to eat

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due to highly toxic levels of carcinogens, DDT and PCBs. The drinking water in the United States Midwest is contaminated. The carcinogen dioxin is being introduced into the body through meat and dairy products. As well, mother's milk in 99% of meat-eaters (as opposed to 8% in vegetarians) has acquired high amounts of DDT, which alters the gene pool and causes damage for generations (EarthSave, Planet 3). The Environmental Protection Agency reports that meat and dairy products carry 95 percent of these residues into the diet (Dworkin 91).

The ecological impact is exhaustive. Almost half of the country's energy is used in the field of agriculture (EarthSave, Planet 3). What about the forests being cleared for grazing lands? And another fact to ponder, livestock is the largest producer of methane gas, a contributor to the greenhouse effect, which is slowly altering the climate of the planet (Dworkin 91).

So why eat meat? Well, of course, for the protein and the many nutrients provided by meat to fill the daily nutritional requirements. Studies now show that if a person's diet of natural foods accounts for the total calories needed to support their lifestyle, it is difficult to produce a diet, which is deficient in protein. The myth of animal proteins being superior to those of plants has been proven false. Nutritional science has shown that with the correct combinations of various plant and grain sources, the protein produced is often of better use to the human form than that provided by an animal source. It is also known that soybean and its products produce a complete protein, which is on equal standards as that provided by meat.

If one looks closely at the facts, the need for a change in dietary habits seems obvious. The dream of having a primarily meat fed society is unreal. The individual pays for it now; and their children and the earth pay later. The health and the welfare of the planet in the future depend on choices made today. Afterall, new tastes can be acquired, especially when the *steaks* are so high.

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