

America trades trees for cheeseburgers

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"We've traded our forests for cheeseburgers, and we've traded our wildlife in the process," asserts John Robbins, the author of the Pulitzer prize-nominated book *Diet for a New America*, who spoke this past Saturday in Dana Auditorium.

Robbins tells primarily of the Earth's tropical rainforests, which are currently being razed at an alarming rate—mainly to graze cattle for import to the United States. Every fast-food hamburger produced, he says, represents the destruction of 55 square feet of tropical rainforest. The fast-food chains of our country are the biggest part of the problem, and in his book Robbins mentions Burger King, which has been implicated by Rainforest Action Network as "a driving force behind this environmental disaster." This activist group tells that "after the cattle have come and gone, it's [the formerly forested land] an eroded wasteland, practically empty of life."

And while many of us had heard that fast food chains had stopped buying the beef of cattle grazed on the carnage of part of the world's oldest and most various ecosystem, Robbins reveals that this is far from the truth. There's a loophole, he says, which allows the McDonald's and Burger Kings of our country to tell the public that their burgers haven't destroyed tropical rainforest. The minute the cow or steer raised in Central or South America sets hoof on the dock in the United States, it is considered U.S. beef.

Likely, few of us are extremely surprised by this information that Robbins shares. But he has much more to say—much more about the toll the meat industry takes on the envi-

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ronment, on our physical and spiritual health and on the animals themselves, many of whom are forced to lead completely unnatural lives in factory farms and who are treated only "as inventory to convert into cash."

Much of Robbins' message Saturday night came from *Diet for a New America*. One man for whom Robbins holds a great deal of respect, as was evidenced from the book and the lecture, is a Native American of the Nineteenth century, Chief Seattle. In a voice that was low, but which commanded the audience's attention, and with a detectable measure of awe, Robbins told the story of Chief Seattle's response when he learned that the "Great Chief in Washington" wished to buy his people's land. Of course, Chief Seattle's only other option was to have his people driven off the land by the U.S. military, but he certainly might have bargained to improve the dismal lot of his people.

Robbins displays amazement at the one request the chief made to our government.

The Native American didn't ask for more blankets or horses to make easier the journey his people were about to undertake. He didn't ask respect for their ancestral burial grounds. He didn't make any of a number of self-serving demands that he might have. Robbins writes, "His one request was as prophetic as it was plain: 'I will make one condition. The white man must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers. For whatever happens to the beasts soon happens to man. All things are connected.'"

Chief Seattle's sense of the interconnectedness of all life is perhaps visionary for our day, but it also represents one of the last vestiges of a paradigm that seems to have been largely pushed out the the modern human mind. The world-view that humans are an integral part of the earth's ecosystem, rather than the supreme rulers of it, has almost vanished on a culture-wide scale. The heinous environmental destruction of roughly the last one hundred years shows this all too well.

"Man did not weave the web of life. He is merely a strand in it," Chief Seattle wrote to our President. "Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."

Robbins says Chief Seattle saw "a war against nature -- a war against ourselves in some sense."

"The natural world is a community of which we are a part, to which we owe our lives," Robbins says. And he demonstrates our connections to the world around us in very matter-of-fact, practical ways.

Robbins tells how meat production unnecessarily taxes many of our resources. One big problem in California, where the author makes his home, is water shortage. He says the state has officially been in a drought for six years running now—but it still raises cattle. This is so astonishing because of the amount of water needed for these animals. Robbins cites a study done by the University of California at Davis, the primary agricultural campus of U.C., which inquired into water usage in the production of various products in California. The data reveals it takes 49 gallons of water to produce a pound of apples. It takes 70 gallons to yield a pound of grapes, 23 gallons for a pound of lettuce. Take a wild guess at how much water is required to produce one pound of beef. Hint: think in thousands and you might have a chance. Well, here it is: 5,214 gallons are necessary to develop only one edible pound of these enormous animals.

Robbins makes an interesting point. If one is conscientious about water use and takes 5 minute showers, with a flow rate of four gallons per minute—which is fairly ample Robbins says—and takes five showers a week, one uses 100 gallons of water per week, 5200 gallons in a year.

"You save more water in California by not

eating one pound of beef than you do by not taking a shower for a year," Robbins says. "You save some other things too," he jokes.

The environmental consequences of the American meat habit, as Robbins calls it, are far reaching and these accounts don't begin to put a dent in the problems dealt with in *Diet for a New America*. Robbins quotes comedian Red Skelton who said, "If we don't change the direction in which we are going, we will end up where we are headed." And at this point, as the musical group "The

Church" sings, "our destination looks kind of bleak."

But most of us believe that we have to eat meat to be healthy—and that the more we eat, the healthier we will be. Robbins tells that this is not the case; in fact,

he is simply repeating to a wider audience what medical research revealed quite some time ago. The problem, Robbins says, is that the various meat industries have a vested interest in keeping from consumers the knowledge that the meat produced today is quite detrimental to a person's health in many ways. Not only is animal meat, especially beef, loaded with saturated fat, today most is laden with chemicals, hormones, and antibiotics needed to keep the animals alive under the conditions in which they are kept. So these industries exert every effort to make people feel like they need meat.

One recent example of this is the advertisement that goes something like, "Beef: Real food for Real people." Robbins questions if this means that vegetarians are unreal somehow. His response to the ad is that if beef is a major part of your diet for a good while in your life, "you better live real close to a real good hospital." He mimicks the ad saying, "Real heart-attacks, Real problems...."

The health problems that have been associated with meat eating are numerous and Robbins gives a full discussion in his book. They are heart disease, breast cancer, osteoporosis, prostate cancer, ovarian cancer...and the list goes on. However, Robbins says, "you don't have to be vegetarian to be concerned about your health. People will take steps that work for them, in balance." He emphasizes that any reduction in meat consumption will improve one's health (as long as one gets necessary nutrients from other sources, which is not hard to do) and will ameliorate our environmental situation and the needless suffering of animals.

Robbins demonstrates how we—and many of the problems we face today—are closely linked with the physical world around us, and more specifically, what we eat in that world around us. But what about a spiritual relationship with animals? What does Robbins offer in this respect? He cites publications such as *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, which can tell us

that saturated animal fats collect in our circulatory systems and can eventually bring about atherosclerosis. But they can't reveal what damage eating animals might wreak on our spiritual lives. Even if there is not empirical evidence, however, we can look to the examples of many great thinkers of our time who were vegetarian; people such as Pythagoras, Gandhi, and Tolstoy, who Robbins discusses in his book.

One person he quotes often in *Diet for a New America* (which consequently can be ordered through the local chapter of EarthSave, the organization Robbins founded, by calling (919) 282-5539) is the author and playwright George Bernard Shaw. During the lecture, Robbins shared one statement of Shaw's that is not included in the book. Robbins gathered a deep voice, heavy with the indignation one might expect of Shaw and quoted: "A man of my spiritual intensity does NOT eat corpses!" The imitation drew laughs, but the message came across clearly.

But as Robbins writes, the ethics of eating animals is not his main concern. "It's not the killing of the animals that is the chief issue here, but rather the unspeakable quality of the lives they are forced to live." The conditions of factory farms, which Robbins describes in detail in his book, are horrific. Indeed, for anyone with a somewhat high esteem of animals, these conditions would not seem dissimilar to those of Nazi extermination camps.

Robbins writes that today, "the suffering these animals undergo has become so extreme that to partake of food from these creatures is to partake unknowingly of the abject misery that has been their lives. We are ingesting nightmares for breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

There is much temptation to slip into denial at such an overwhelming deluge of bad news. Robbins himself admits he had to fight off the desire to simply ignore, to forget. Many questions arise. Will we treat the animals of this land like our brothers and

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sisters? Will we acknowledge the interconnectedness of all things in what Chief Seattle called the web of life? Can we find a part of ourselves in the nature from which we seem to have largely divorced ourselves?

"The more we succeed in numbing ourselves to our deepest human responses, the more powerless, futile, and isolated we feel," Robbins writes. In order to regain a sense of connection with our planet, and thus to feel the power our individual lives have in creating a better, more humane world, Robbins makes this recommendation: "Be out in the natural world as much as possible, and become aware of the ways you erect barriers between yourself and life."