

The Myth Of The Meat-Eating Environmentalist

The Willow Tree

By Ruth Cook

An environmentalist still cannot eat meat. The reason for today's column is energy inefficiency. The term energy inefficiency covers a broad spectrum of environmental issues. The spectrum includes such issues as fossil fuel abuse, which destroys the areas in which the fuel is mined and releases greenhouse gases which may greatly alter the Earth, to the wasting of high level energy, which the meat industry and a meat diet greatly affect. (For those of you who are reading this column for the first time or have forgotten due to my inactivity at the paper, I shall refresh you on the definition of an environmentalist I am using for the purposes of my argument). An environmentalist is a person who is not merely philosophically, but actively concerned about the positive welfare of and the negative effects of human activity on the environment and acts upon these concerns as much as feasibly possible.

While our dependency on fossil fuel would not end with the

termination of meat production and consumption, a nationwide switch to vegetarianism could cut oil imports by 60%, if there was a world wide switch (all other factors being equal) "the current oil reserves would last 260 years instead of 40-80 years" (Miller 567). Because of the negative effects caused by the use of fossil fuels, it is the duty of the environmentalist to cut such uses to the smallest number possible.

Energy equivalent to 50 gallons of gasoline is required for the production of meat and poultry consumed each year by the typical American; that is two-thirds more energy than required to nourish a vegetarian (Durning 26). Due to the context from which these facts are derived, I believe the quoted energy requirements represent only the energy needed to actually raise the animals and are not inclusive of the total energy required to make a hamburger out of a cow. There are many more steps (which use high-quality energy) in the conversion of an animal into a processed-ready-to-eat meal than in the production and delivery of a corn cob, and thus the gap between the energy needed to sustain a meat-based diet and a vegetarian diet should be broader than the statistics stated above imply.

To understand the implications of wasting high-quality energy, one must know the Laws of Thermodynamics. The first: "Energy cannot be created or destroyed; it can only be changed from one form to another." The second: "In any conversion of energy from one form to another, high-quality, useful energy is always degraded to lower-quality energy that can't be recycled or

give high-quality energy; we can't [even] break even in terms of energy equality." Each step in the food chain represents a conversion of energy, consequently with each step a greater amount of high-quality energy is converted into low-quality energy. Thus when humans eat low on the food chain (skipping the meat) they are capable of receiving and preserving greater amounts of high-quality energy with less consumption. The Laws of Thermodynamics also apply to the steps needed to make "bringing home the bacon" possible. Each step represents a point in which high-quality energy, fossil fuel, is needed to produce an increasingly lower-quality product. This fact offends the principle of energy efficiency, which in turn should offend the environmentalist who realizes while there is a guaranteed quantity of energy, there is an ever decreasing amount of high-quality energy which should be conserved for more essential activities (meat consumption is not essential to human health).

The energy discussed above related primarily to the energy provided by fossil fuels. However, meat production also wastes another form of energy, the energy provided by organisms low on the food chain. One pound of beef is the equivalent of 16 pounds of grain and soy beans (Lappe 11)³. The average for all meat is seven pounds of grain and soy beans to the pound of meat (Lappe 13). If the grain used to produce livestock (40% of the world's grain production and 70% of the United States', according to USDA data) were instead consumed directly by humans, five times as many people would be

nourished (Durning 26). In another twist of the implications of such a grain-meat equivalency, "supporting just the world's current population of 5,300,000,000 [humans] on a US-style diet would require two and one-half times as much grain as all the world's farmers produce" (Durning 27). Thus if everyone were to eat in the manner of the current average American, energy waste would greatly be magnified.

While a meat diet is not the sole cause of energy inefficiency, the energy wasted on meat production does have a notable negative impact on the environment. Thus, because the environmentalist must take actions to protect the environment from human induced negative impact, the environmentalist must refrain from the consumption of meat. Otherwise, the environmentalist would be participating in hypocritical actions by saying, "wasting energy is bad, but eating meat, which wastes much energy, is okay."

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