

Sierra

CAN YOU EAT MEAT  
AND CONSIDER  
YOURSELF AN  
ENVIRONMENTALIST?

If every person on the planet stopped eating meat tomorrow, we would still have polluted lakes and rivers, acid rain, nuclear proliferation, and air that's unfit to breathe. It would be sheer idiocy to alienate the burger eaters of the world (like me) by suggesting we are too morally bankrupt to care about the planet.

*H. R. Sweet, Culver City, Calif.*

The facts speak for themselves: ■ More than 50 percent of tropical rainforest deforestation is linked to livestock raising. ■ 2,500 gallons of water are needed to produce one pound of meat. ■ At least 85 percent of U.S. topsoil loss is directly associated with livestock grazing. ■ Forty-five percent of total U.S. land is used for livestock. ■ More than 50 percent of water pollution can be traced to wastes from the livestock industry (including manure, eroded soil, and synthetic pesticides and fertilizers). ■ An added note: 76 percent of Americans call themselves environmentalists; 2.8 percent are vegetarian.

*S. R. Furia, Revere, Mass.*

It takes 22 times more energy to produce a pound of protein from beef than from corn or wheat. Burning this extra energy means greatly increased carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions. This, plus the fact that cows release from 5 to 9 percent of what they eat as methane (a primary greenhouse gas), has led to calls for a climate tax on beef. Grilling that steak amounts to grilling our world.

*J. Robbins, Felton, Calif.*

If vegetarianism were a prerequisite for environmentalism, you could kiss 9/10ths of your constituents goodbye.

*D. Armstrong, Fayetteville, N. Y.*

Raccoons eat loon eggs. Cheetahs eat gazelles. Wolves eat cows. Aren't humans, like these predators, near the top of the food chain?

*P. Davies, Breuwater, N. Y.*

Admittedly, a habit acquired in infancy and practiced daily for many years is difficult to break. But meat eating is not addictive. Let's hear it for plant foods—the foods that will sustain us in an overpopulated and resource-endangered world!

*K. Bushnell, Palo Alto, Calif.*

The environmental damage associated with meat production and consumption is a symptom of human overpopulation and the inability of the environment to support an omnivorous human population. The fact is that environmental damage (erosion, pollution from pesticides and excessive fertilizers, salt buildup from irrigation, depletion of groundwater, loss of species and genetic diversity) is also associated with the production of wheat, corn, soya beans, rice, and oats. Natural ecosystems are much more productive (net photosynthesis and accumulation of organic matter, internal energy flow) than agricultural ones, although the net production is less edible by *Homo sapiens*. A human population that was within the long-term carrying capacity of the Earth could consume meat without damage to the planet's ecosystem.

*J. W. Robinson, Seabrook, Md.*

What a non sequitur! Remember: Aldo Leopold ate meat, Adolf Hitler did not. A real question would be: Can a rancher/farmer/logger/oilman/land developer be an environmentalist?

*H. M. Stein, Washingtonville, N. Y.*

By eating higher up on the food chain you put a greater portion of the earth's resources on your plate. You can't save the environment and eat it too.

*A. G. White, San Francisco, Calif.*

FOR NEXT TIME...

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Balance is the key. A few lean slices of pork or beef in a stirfry are not going to ruin the planet. Americans strain the food chain unduly by thinking that a hefty chunk of meat must be the *pièce de résistance* of a good meal. Meat should humbly complement an artfully prepared and nutritionally balanced meal, not dominate or suffocate it.

*C. Machado, Corvallis, Ore.*

A meat eater has as much right to be considered an environmentalist as the person who drives an automobile a few hundred miles to go hiking.

*A. Talentino, Cortland, N. Y.*

I recently tried to devise an environmentally correct menu. I concluded that such a meal could not include crops grown with irrigation water or pesticides. It couldn't include coffee or crops such as bananas for which tropical rainforest was cleared. And it certainly couldn't include any fish or other seafood until the world's fish stocks are returned to their former healthy state. That didn't leave much except food salvaged from dumpsters.

*B. Tellman, Tucson, Ariz.*

Even vegetarians eat living organisms, including wheat, tomatoes, seaweed, and eggs. Can they assure us that these organisms suffer no pain when they are harvested, cooked, or eaten, or that their production creates no environmental damage?

*C. Woo, San Francisco, Calif.*

Predation is a natural and essential part of the real world. It is the driving force of evolution and the single most important factor in keeping species fit. If all humans became vegetarians, it would increase rather than decrease animal suffering. Many domestic forms would become extinct (who is going to keep all those pet cows?) and game species like whitetail deer would destroy their habitat (causing the elimination of many other animals in the process), leading to massive die-offs and great misery. Let us not confuse "factory farming," which is ecologically indefensible, with "carnivory," which is ecologically essential. I can think of nothing that would destroy the environmental movement faster than equating it with vegetarianism.

*D. T. McGinty, Montgomery, Ala.*