

The environmental benefits of vegetarianism

By **Gabe Bronk and Arthur Su**/ Special To The Tab

Wednesday, July 5, 2006

Vegetarianism is not only a response to the inhumane practices of factory farms; it is also a way to conserve natural resources, improve the environment and benefit human health.

The meat industry is very wasteful of natural resources. An inherent problem with eating meat is that an animal must be fed roughly ten pounds of plants to produce one pound of meat. Therefore, much more food is consumed to support the animals than would be needed if more people were vegetarians. Seventy percent of the grain grown in the US is used to feed livestock. Because of the growth of so much animal feed, half the water consumed in the U.S. is used by the meat industry, and our groundwater is being withdrawn 25% faster than it is being replenished. In the High Plains states from South Dakota to New Mexico, it is projected that the aquifer will be depleted in 60 years. Erosion and nutrient depletion caused by animal feed production and overgrazing by livestock are destroying vast areas of arable land.

We are currently in an oil crisis, and the meat industry is exacerbating it. Eight times as much fossil fuel energy is used in the production of animal protein as is used in plant protein production due to the fuel required to manufacture fertilizers and pesticides for animal feed, to operate farming machinery, for transportation and for irrigation. Four hundred gallons of fossil fuels are used to produce food for the average meat-eating American each year.

A meat eater requires two to four times more farmland than a vegetarian. To make room for enough farmland, the meat industry constantly destroys

vital ecosystems, thus taking away the habitats of myriad species and reducing biodiversity. The vast Amazon rainforest is rapidly being destroyed to make way for ranching and growing animal feed and will be gone by the end of this century if the current rate of destruction continues. Do you want to let this happen?



Gabe Ronk and Arthur Su will be seniors at Newton North High School this fall.

The damage to the environment does not stop at animal feed production. The plants are fed to the livestock, which, after digesting the food, produce 1.37 billion tons of manure in the U.S. annually. The manure often spills out of open-air storage pits and into waterways, accelerating the growth of algae. When the algae die, their decomposition depletes the water of oxygen. This causes the deaths of millions of fish. Manure also releases ammonia into the air, which can contaminate rain, killing forests. Fumes from factory farms cause people in the area to experience respiratory problems and other ailments. Nitrates leak from manure into community drinking water, causing serious human health problems.

The meat industry contributes significantly to global warming. Methane, a greenhouse gas, is released by bacteria in the rumens of cattle and in the manure of many farm animals. Furthermore, forests and grasslands that would absorb high amounts of carbon dioxide are cleared to make way for farmland. To make matters worse, the enormous fires used to burn down these forests release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

The fishing industry also contributes to environmental degradation. Many species are being fished faster than they can reproduce. 15 of the 17 major ocean fisheries are exhausted or overexploited, so many marine food webs are depleted, and ocean ecosystems are seriously damaged. Myriads of other animals are accidentally caught and killed in the nets, such as nearly 300,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises killed each year. Pulling bottom trawls across the seafloor devastates habitats including coral reefs.

You can help save the environment and keep yourself healthy at the same time; according to the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada, vegan and vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of life as long as the vegetarian gets all necessary nutrition, which is easy to do. Visit www.veganhealth.org for nutrition information.

A well-planned vegetarian or vegan diet offers many health benefits. Vegetarians have lower blood cholesterol levels, lower rates hypertension and lower rates of death from ischemic heart disease due to the lower levels of saturated fat found in animal products and the higher levels of antioxidants found in fruits and vegetables. Fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes and whole grains, all staples of a vegetarian diet, provide better nutrition and help prevent many diseases.

Spurred by this knowledge as well as by the meat industry's brutality towards animals, we became vegetarian/vegan and have examined and promoted vegetarianism as a project for our biology class at Newton North High School.

Consider the possibilities. There are many delicious and varied foods that do not contain animal products. We're not just talking lettuce and bananas; think grilled veggie burger or bean burrito. If becoming vegetarian seems like a difficult task, try reducing your consumption of meat gradually; cut out meat one day a week at first. Soon you will have a healthier diet and be saving natural resources and the environment. If you do become vegetarian, email us at vegetarianism@comcast.net to let us know that this article had the desired effect.

More information at <http://www.sierraclub.com/factoryfarms>
www.veganoutreach.org/whyvegan and Pamela Rice, *101 Reasons Why I'm a Vegetarian*. Lantern Books, 2005.

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