



**Kevin Nealon says...
"Plant-based diet saves the Earth!"**

The Power of Your Fork

Today millions of people are concerned about the environment. From school children to seniors, people are making new choices and taking new actions to protect the Earth. Phrases like "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" have become a part of the vocabulary and daily routine for people young and old. But as we plant trees with our children, clean up river banks with neighbors and switch to energy-efficient lighting in our homes, we risk overlooking one of the greatest tools for protecting our planet: the fork. In fact, the types of food we choose to eat have just as much of an impact on our planet's well-being as other well-known choices we make -- like the decision we make at the checkout lane between cloth, paper, or plastic.

Getting food into the dialogue

While it's easy to imagine toxic wastes from manufacturing, few of us have stopped to consider the environmental impact of producing our food. Most discussions about the environment might focus on a long list of issues such as global warming, toxic emissions, use of fossil fuels, water quality, air quality, forest preservation and so forth. If you visit a classroom lecture on the environment or a community celebration of Earth Day, you'll probably learn about energy, recycling, and water and air quality -- but not about how what we eat affects our environment. If you attend a meeting of a local environmental group, you are not likely to hear a dialogue about food -- or to find that any meal prepared for the meeting is made with any attention toward preparing "eco-friendly" cuisine.

But food production in this country, particularly with the increasing use of factory farming, consumes vast amounts of natural resources and exacts a high environmental toll. Today's Standard American Diet (SAD -- a descriptive abbreviation!), with meat and dairy products at its center, creates the demand for a certain type of farming. And nowhere is the environmental impact of the foods we eat more destructive and far-reaching than in the production of animal products -- from beef and poultry to fish and dairy.

Impact on water

Consider, for example, the impact on our water supply. A person concerned about conserving water might turn off the water while brushing his or her teeth or shaving. They might even install a low-flow showerhead. But few people realize the enormous amounts of water used by animal agriculture: water for animals to drink and also water used to grow all the crops that are fed to the animals. Over half of U.S. farm fields are devoted to raising feed grains for animals, and some of these fields are irrigated. The result: The production of a single pound of feedlot beef, for example, requires an incredible 600 gallons of water; and, in areas needing irrigation, that number can quadruple! That's a lot more water than the average person will save with their environmentally-friendly showerhead.

Animal agriculture is a primary source of water pollution as well. Factory farms spring up in rural areas, offering jobs and a boost to the local economy. But the by-products produced by these large-scale operations, especially the massive amounts of manure, often wreak havoc on the local water supply. Livestock farms now generate an estimated 5 tons of animal manure for every person in the United States

every year. Manure management is becoming a big problem. In 1995, for example, holding lagoons spilled more than 40 million gallons of hog manure into North Carolina waterways, about double the amount of oil lost by the Exxon Valdez.

Other materials used on factory farms find their way into the water supply. Fertilizers, manure, and agricultural chemicals washed from the Mississippi have created a 7,000 square mile lifeless expanse at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico called "The Dead Zone." This past summer headlines warned of pfiesteria, a dangerous microbe known as the "cell from hell" that killed 30,000 fish in the Chesapeake Bay, when poultry manure, spread on farmland, leached into the water.

Finally, our oceans also carry the burden of our food choices. All seventeen of the world's major fishing areas reached and exceeded their natural catch limits early in this decade. But they continue to be fished. And what few people know is that one-third of the fish caught worldwide never make it to the dinner table; they're ground up and fed to livestock.

Impact on the land

Raising livestock in large numbers uses vast amounts of available land and takes a heavy toll on the land that is used. Every year in South and Central America, 5 million acres of rainforest are felled to create cattle pasture. And here at home, seventy percent of the land in the western United States is used to graze cattle (including 306 million acres of public land), resulting in erosion and the loss of native plants and animals. Valuable topsoil is being irrevocably lost the world over and millions of acres of once-productive land turned into desert all due to our SAD dietary habits.

Energy and Global Warming

Obviously, two additional major environmental concerns are energy-efficiency and global warming. But few of the dialogues about solar heating or battery operated cars take into account the energy efficiency of our current farming system. Animal agriculture is terribly inefficient. A person eating no meat or dairy consumes around 2,500 calories of crop production each day; but people who eat just 30 percent of their food as animal products require crop production of 9,000 calories. Rarely mentioned in all the recent press about global warming are the huge amounts of carbon dioxide, methane, and other global-warming gases produced by our energy-intensive system of animal agriculture. All told, when combined with the destruction of rain forests for pastures and increasing global desertification, animal agriculture creates truly dire global consequences.

What You Can Do

Today's headlines about environmental ills can often leave us feeling powerless to make any change. But the good news about the environmental impact of food is that we have the ability to make our own choices in this area. It's as simple as picking up a fork. A move toward a plant-based diet centered around fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes uses fewer resources and takes less of a toll on our planet.

Here's how you can get involved:

- Get "food choices" into the environmental dialogue.
- Shift toward a plant-based diet. If you already eat this way, then encourage others to do so.

Participate in EarthSave's "Save the Earth -- One Bite at a Time" campaign.

References

1. United States Department of Agriculture, 1997 Census of Agriculture.
2. J.L. Beckett and J.W. Oltjen, *Journal of Animal Science*, 1993, 71:818-826.
3. Based on a 1.5 gallon per flush low-flow toilet.
4. *Animal Waste Pollution in America: An Emerging National Problem*, Report Compiled by the Minority Staff of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry for Senator Tom Harkin (R-IA) Ranking Member, December 1997.
5. "Water Quality," Report of the Agricultural Animal Waste Task Force, April 1996, Duke University.
6. Jonathan Tolman, "Poisonous Runoff from Farm Subsidies," *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 8, 1995.
7. Rodney Barker, *And the Waters Turned to Blood*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.
8. Lester Brown et al., *Vital Signs 1994*, Worldwatch Institute, 1994, p. 32.
9. Carl Safina, "The World's Imperiled Fish," *Scientific American*, Nov. 1995.
10. Norman Meyers, *The Primary Source: Tropical Forests & Our Future*, New York: Norton, 1992.11.
11. Erik Marcus, *Vegan: The New Ethics of Eating*, Ithaca, NY, McBooks Press, 1997, p. 172.
12. *Ibid*, p. 165.

<http://www.earthsave.org/news/powrfork.htm>