Five fatal flaws of animal activism

From tacky nude posters to dubious concepts such as 'happy meat', animal rights groups are losing the fight for real change

Victor Schonfeld
guardian.co.uk, Monday 18 January 2010 14.00 GMT
Article history

A 1994 anti-fur campaign poster for Peta. Photograph: Rex Features

There are a few things that have kept me going, and kept me proud of how I've been living over the decades. Pretty near the top of the list is being a vegetarian for ethical reasons. That was deeply unfashionable back in 1977 when I abandoned meat-eating and went on to make The Animals Film. I was over the moon when that film had a greater impact than I'd dreamed it would; and then I went back to human concerns in my creative work. It wasn't until some 30 years later at the suggestion of the BBC World Service that I returned to this terrain for the radio documentary series One Planet: Animals and Us. But I'd remained a vegetarian, and so hoped to discover that the exploitation of animals for food and science had been reduced since the 1980s.

What I found, however, was more than disappointing – a complete absence of decisive progress. Austria with several new laws has come closest to meaningful change, but even there the number of animals suffering for human needs and pleasures is undiminished, and the industrialised exploitation of animals for food is spreading across the globe.

There has been one unarguable advance, though, and that's been the progressive "normalisation" of vegetarianism over the years.

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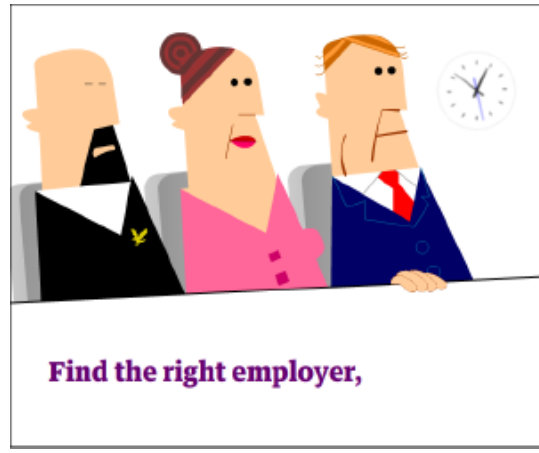

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When I first settled in Britain, restaurants seldom offered vegetarian choices; supermarkets barely catered to my needs at all. London's main vegetarian restaurant was named Cranks, and that said it all. Today, by contrast, families happily pop out to the corner shop to buy vegetarian foods to host my young daughter, and "veggie" options are steadily becoming staples in school lunch halls.

In light of this, one New Zealand-based listener's criticism of my work for the BBC World Service stood out from enthusiastic responses to the programmes. "So disappointing to hear Schonfeld is still a vegetarian after so many years," she complained. What she was underlining is that I had not become a vegan. Though I concluded the series with Professor Gary Francione calling for vegan education as "the moral baseline" for animal rights, that still left the question: what about me personally, and the way I live now?

I had stopped short of removing milk and eggs from my diet and all leather and wool from my clothing. I'd had my rationales for this, the main one being that I hadn't wanted to impose too zealously nonconformist a lifestyle on my family. Also, in the 1980s, one of the traps for the animal rights movement was marginalisation. So when I was interviewed about The Animals Film and journalists thought they'd caught me out in personal inconsistencies, I'd say I wore leather shoes or took milk in my coffee so that the implications of the film couldn't be dismissed by labelling the filmmaker a fanatic.

But now in the 21st century supermarkets routinely cater to vegetarian food buyers, restaurant menus regularly display vegetarian symbols, and the harm to health and the global environment caused by factory farming has become established knowledge. It's time for vegans to become vocal. Even free range eggs and organic milk production entail significant suffering and the animals are killed when their productivity goes down.

Yet we are socialised from early childhood to use a plethora of animal products without thinking. To follow a vegan path requires daily thought and effort. Here's what I've realised: getting to that ultimate zero-exploitation goal may be elusive, but the continuing efforts are empowering.

So, on an individual level I'm hopeful. But the Animals and Us series made vivid that the organised group efforts on behalf of animals have been largely fruitless to date, in terms of the end goals, and campaigns for small changes are quite possibly counterproductive. The organised activism is sorely in need of fresh perspectives. Thus I submit here for scrutiny five fatal flaws of animal activism:

1. Instead of promoting animal rights goals as a major plank within broader social change movements, animal organisations insist on going it alone. Yet the Green party's animal rights goals are as radical as any animal rights organisation's.

2. One of the world's largest animal rights organisations routinely employs naked young women, including porn stars, to chase mass media attention. Would a human rights organisation stoop so low?

3. Animal rights organisations have been handing out awards and lavishing praise on slaughterhouse designers and burger restaurant chains after "negotiations" for small changes that leave the systems of exploitation intact.

4. Instead of animal rights organisations promoting a clear "moral baseline" that individuals should become vegans to curb their own demands for animal exploitation, groups have given their stamp of approval to deeply compromised marketing concepts such as "happy meat", "freedom foods", "sustainable meat", and "conscientious omnivores".

5. Tactics of violence and personal intimidation have at long last fallen out of favour, but activists now pour energy and resources into organisations that lack any real strategy for bringing an end to animal exploitation, whether for food or science.

Animal activists have not been asking themselves the difficult questions, and organisational self-promotion stunts substitute for the less glamorous work of figuring out how to help each of us change the way we live. Much noise, little change. Perhaps it's time to reverse that.

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rightwinggit
18 Jan 2010, 2:07PM

Recommend? (44)
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"We'd rather go naked than wear fur!"

Yes and every teenage boy would rather they went naked too.

Iwouldntiflwereyou
18 Jan 2010, 2:07PM

Recommend? (28)
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Clip | Link

When mankind gets over the idea that the rest of creation is here merely for us to use abuse and drive to extinction then mankind will truly have become civilised.

No animal is a savage beast, only human kind deserve that title.

So don't knock those who feel that mankind will not inherit the earth.

Merely plague, famine and destruction.

OneInTen
18 Jan 2010, 2:11PM

Recommend? (41)
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Interesting article which makes a change from the usual pseudo-scientific explanations of why vital animal testing is "unnecessary". However, I must pick you up on your use of the word "exploitation"; it's emotive and only clouds the issues at hand. Also -

> Tactics of violence and personal intimidation have at long last fallen out of favour

Only because the main perpetrators are now behind bars. That's hardly progress.

Leftisbest
18 Jan 2010, 2:11PM

Recommend? (57)
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It is easy to see where animal rights activists have gone wrong.

Huge strides have been made in relation to animal testing and pharmacutical products.

However the population generally supports animal testing for medical products. Attacks by animal rights activists (who can forget the digging up of a dead realitive) on people who look to save human life mean that the goodwill that activists have built up has evaporated.

it is a shame but blame the extremists.

plus people dont like to be preached to about veganism as most people think that these people are mad. who would ban their children from vital vitamins which are only found in meat?

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LordSummerisle
18 Jan 2010, 2:11PM

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> 4. Instead of animal rights organisations promoting a clear "moral baseline" that individuals should become vegans to curb their own demands for animal exploitation, groups have given their stamp of approval to deeply compromised marketing concepts such as "happy meat", "freedom foods", "sustainable meat", and "conscientious omnivores".

The idea of small achievable goals leading to real change as opposed to making unreasonable demands that everyone shuts their minds to immediately is one that's totally lost on you then, Victor?

AntiTerrorist
18 Jan 2010, 2:13PM

Recommend? (9)
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I am sorry, I applaud your efforts, and perhaps one day you will 'win' but I can't see it happening anytime soon. And I am sure along shortly will be any number of carnivores to very vocally make that point.

---

shellshock
18 Jan 2010, 2:14PM

Recommend? (38)
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> I had stopped short of removing milk and eggs from my diet and all leather and wool from my clothing. I'd had my rationales for this, the main one being that I hadn't wanted to impose too zealously nonconformist a lifestyle on my family.

see, there's the problem right there, the fact that you feel the need to justify your decision, instead of telling the wombat who said: *So disappointing to hear Schonfeld is still a vegetarian after so many years,"* to get a life and mind her own business, you feel the need to explain and justify.

Animal rights activists time would be better spent improving the lot of animals who are going to be eaten, rather than lecturing carnivores on what not to eat.

The last straw for me in giving animal righters any credibility at all was '**seakittens**'. Final proof of their mental health issues

---

EduardodiCapuo
18 Jan 2010, 2:14PM

Recommend? (70)
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Human beings are omnivores, a quick look at their teeth confirms this. Animals are there to be eaten, many speciaes have been successfully seletively bred for this purpose to the extent they are not capable of living in the wild any more, they are either bred for meant or the speciaes will die out. I can't see that any race of animals -were they sentient- would vote for that.

Animals don't have rights, rights are what the law gives one, everything else is up for negotiations, we humans have a responsibility to treat food animals well, not to cause suffering , and to eat fewer of them because that would be good for our health. The rest of the animals rights nonsense is just that. NONSENSE!

If you don't want to eat meat, then Don't, I'm not trying to make you. Please keep your ill informed foolish ideas to yourselves though.

SD1000
18 Jan 2010, 2:16PM

Recommend? (15)
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Veganism is never going to be as "successful" as vegatarianism, and that's because it's not as rational. Humanity has been eating cheese for thousands of years and we're not going to stop now thank you very much.

On another point, I don't quite understand what's 'low' about using naked women or porn stars in adverts? I'd stick to moralising about food if I were you.

Neofaust
18 Jan 2010, 2:16PM

Recommend? (28)
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No matter how hard I try, I just can't see eating meat as wrong.

And I'm trying real hard, Sasha, REAL hard.

Nicola6
18 Jan 2010, 2:17PM

Recommend? (35)
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Quite. The most revolting example of unethical compromise I've come across is the RSPCA Freedom Foods banner, under which animals farmed in appalling conditions are marketed as 'Freedom Food'.

Vegetarianism is a no brainer: better for animals, the environment, human health, obesity. Veganism has become a lot easier over the last ten years as more products become available.

I continue to live in hope that one day the way we treat animals will be viewed in much the same way as we now view slavery.

---

helpop
18 Jan 2010, 2:18PM

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Small changes may not be ideal but they are at least achievable. Promoting a fully vegan lifestyle for everyone on the planet is so unrealistic that it would be a waste of money and effort to promote.

People only mildly interested in animal cruelty need to be encouraged towards making achievable steps, not put off by absolutes.

Yak40
18 Jan 2010, 2:20PM

Recommend? (17)
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Tactics of violence and personal intimidation have at long last fallen out of favour,

Really ?

Tell that to the lunatic charging around the Antarctic in his pirate ship.

(No, I don't support whaling, but neither do I support piracy).

---

unexceptional
18 Jan 2010, 2:23PM

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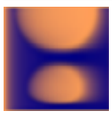

Rotwatcher
18 Jan 2010, 2:23PM

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> No matter how hard I try, I just can't see eating meat as wrong.
>
> And I'm trying real hard, Sasha, REAL hard.

One can only assume you lack the wherewithal to try hard enough.

EduardodiCapuo
18 Jan 2010, 2:23PM

This comment has been removed by a moderator. Replies may also be deleted.

RubenRemus
18 Jan 2010, 2:24PM

Recommend? (16)
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Sasha Grey on a animal rights poster?

what a hypocrite- I've seen her stuff loads of meat into herself

---

hotchilidog
18 Jan 2010, 2:24PM

Recommend? (44)
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@ Leftisbest

Which vital vitamins are only found meat?

Last time I checked the answer was none whatsoever. When faced with ignorance like this it is no wonder that vegans sometimes come across as preachy.

goldmine
18 Jan 2010, 2:25PM

Recommend? (51)
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I like to think that if a pig could see the smile on my face when I'm presented with a plate of crispy bacon, they'd be proud of the sacrifice they're making.

FreemanMoxy
18 Jan 2010, 2:27PM

Recommend? (4)
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> I don't quite understand what's 'low' about using naked women or porn stars in adverts? I'd stick to moralising about food if I were you.

The reason is elaborated, with great humour, here.

imogenblack
18 Jan 2010, 2:28PM

Recommend? (19)
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"We'd rather go naked than wear fur!"

Sure I saw at least two of them doing just that quite recently....

Sigh - I gotta agree with LordS - your radical desire is important and needed but unless you can come to an understanding of how human change actually happens (slowly, with small steps) then you are pissing in the wind a touch.

legalcynic
18 Jan 2010, 2:29PM

Recommend? (11)
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What I want to know is where I can fair trade, organic foie gras?

.

.

.

Actually I'm looking for somewhere that sells whale meat, but was too ashamed to ask.

AldoApache
18 Jan 2010, 2:32PM

Recommend? (46)
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Being vegan is a modern luxury born from the very brutalities that carved out civilisation, to have the luxury of being a vegan today is due to the trails under taken and progress made by meat eaters in the past to afford such opportunities.

Sure progress will have to be made to reduce the amount of meat people eat, but militant veggies need to accept reality and not to get fascist about it otherwise it will just end in tears for them. You cannot stop people eating meat if they don't want too.

Also if the s**t hit the fan tomorrow, and we either went back to square one, or in the future we have to live in a very arid or icy world then it will not be a viable option either.

Put a vegan in the artic without his/her supplements or tofu or other processed foods and tell them to survive on the natural environment and see how long they can hold out. I can safely say it won't be very long before they either die, or become meat eaters.

Also i see no point whining over fur, hunting for fur is wrong, but if an animal dies naturally, why can't it's fur be used instead of being left to waste?

Live and let live i say, but also accept reality on both sides.

OZKT29B
18 Jan 2010, 2:32PM

Recommend? (42)
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SD1000

> Humanity has been eating cheese for thousands of years and we're not going to stop now thank you very much.

We've been eating meat for even longer.

Neofaust

> No matter how hard I try, I just can't see eating meat as wrong.

Same here, to be honest. The difference with me is that I don't even try. There's frankly more important causes in the world to get worked up about. 'Mankind' are essentialy animals, and like all animals we prey on those lower down the food chain.

I'd dispute the term 'animal cruelty' too - it's politically loaded and misleading. Cruelty implies that we torture animals for some sort of perverse pleasure, whereas in fact abbatoirs make the process as swift as possible.

---

stiltonwarrior
18 Jan 2010, 2:34PM

Recommend? (27)
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I wonder how much smaller the human race would be if our ancestors preffered naked to fur? I doubt any of the women in the poster would even understand my point there.

The problem is the ideology not the strategy. Most 'Animals Rights' are just a collection of ignorant myths and hypocrisy. Take the dangerous campaign against animal testing that elevated the status of rodents to that of cancer patients. Its an extraordinarily inhumane way of thinking about the world and your fellow man. Most vegetarians are OK because its a simple personal choice thing. I cut meat out for some months myself because I wanted a change of lifestyle. Veganism I cannot abide because it isn't even natural. There have been cases of parents giving kids rickets disease which is rather crazy.

---

rightwinggit
18 Jan 2010, 2:35PM

Recommend? (30)
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@Nicola6

> Vegetarianism is a no brainer: better for animals, the environment, human health, obesity. Veganism has become a lot easier over the last ten years as more products become available

Not sure it's better for human health.

in a survey of longevity, the longest lived groups were (longest first)

1. (by a long way) Fish eaters
2= Vegetarians
2= Occaisional meat eaters
4. Regular meat eaters
5. (by a long way) Vegans.

Eating the dead flesh of seakittens seems to be the way to go for health reasons.

---

unexceptional
18 Jan 2010, 2:36PM

Recommend? (30)
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> I'd dispute the term 'animal cruelty' too - it's politically loaded and misleading. Cruelty implies that we torture animals for some sort of perverse pleasure, whereas in fact abbatoirs make the process as swift as possible.

Indeed. presumably it would be less cruel if, like happens in nature, we jumped on beasts' and hacked at them with our teeth, watching them slowly die as we tore chucks of raw gore directly from their hinds.

Much less cruel.

---

hogswatch
18 Jan 2010, 2:36PM

This comment has been removed by a moderator. Replies may also be deleted.

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hotchilidog
18 Jan 2010, 2:38PM

Recommend? (30)
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> Being vegan is a modern luxury born from the very brutalities that carved out civilisation, to have the luxury of being a vegan today is due to the trails under taken and progress made by meat eaters in the past to afford such opportunities.

The luxury of being vegan? What is that supposed to mean? Since when has not eating animals been considered a luxury? As far as I'm aware vegetables, fruits, nuts, beans and grains are pretty widely available to all.

FYI it is possible to be a vegan and not eat tofu.

OZKT29B
18 Jan 2010, 2:42PM

Recommend? (21)
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@hogswatch

> And AR campaigners are without exception monumental and complete knob-heads.

Look no further than this thread for proof of that:

> I continue to live in hope that one day the way we treat animals will be viewed in much the same way as we now view slavery.

Right, that'll probably happen once we solve climate change, poverty, hunger, conflict and finally can devote ourselves to this pressing issue. Then we can have 'human guilt' and make restitutions to the cows for eating their forebears.

Gangastaista
18 Jan 2010, 2:43PM

Recommend? (48)
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Iwouldntiflwereyou

> No animal is a savage beast, only human kind deserve that title.

I don't know, chimps have inter-tribal massacres, ants have systematic slavery, and lions eat the children of other lions.

But only mankind has the Xbox.

NeilBasil
18 Jan 2010, 2:44PM

Recommend? (10)
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What is most puzzling is actually what the hell you are on about, Victor.

A vegetarian for ethical reasons? And proud that you kept going for all those years?

What ethics? - something to do with reducing animal suffering? or to do with the environmental impact of animal farming? Well, you haven't taken that stuff seriously because you reckon veganism is too scary (like, hell, maybe you actually would be making a statement).

So keep your excuses going - and just go away, you have to be a little more into consistency to get respect.

OZKT29B
18 Jan 2010, 2:46PM

Recommend? (15)
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hotch,

> Since when has not eating animals been considered a luxury?

What, when you're knee deep in delicious, nutritious, pre-slaughetered, pre packed, reasonably priced animals? Ask the circa 36,000,000 people who die of hunger annually.

GrumpyForeigner
18 Jan 2010, 2:46PM

Recommend? (5)
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> Which vital vitamins are only found meat?

> Last time I checked the answer was none whatsoever. When faced with ignorance like this it is no wonder that vegans sometimes come across as preachy.

Try B12 for starters.

While I have quite some sympathy for the idea of veganism (for various reasons), in my country it is just not that easy. You can get by with hardly any problems as a veggie, but here the supply of vegan food is more limited than in the UK. Or, maybe, producers are not that aware of this potential market and don't label vegan food as vegan, but as vegetarian instead.

In my day-to-day life, I think I can get as close to the ideal as circumstances permit, but that will be it. But if more people did the same, perceptions and the market would change. Every little counts.

SD1000
18 Jan 2010, 2:47PM

Recommend? (8)
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OZKT29B, you're right, but eating cheese doesn't involve quite so much killing.

And while you're also right that there are more important things to get worked up about, I'd say that one of the most important things is the future of the planet, and with cow farts contributing so enormously to climate change, isn't whether or not to become vegetarian quite a big player in that rather important debate?

---

mdow
18 Jan 2010, 2:47PM

Recommend? (15)
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I hope your next posting will list ways to address/correct those five fatal flaws. I agree that those items on your list are problematic and would like your views on what should be done instead.

For those who'd like to think about the source of over 99 percent of the food in the U.S., and probably a comparable percentage in the UK, i.e. if you'd actually like to make an informed decision about what you eat, I recommend *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer. The book makes no recommendations and presents myriad perspectives on the issue of the source of food; it is up to the reader to respond as s/he sees fit. I hope everyone will take an opportunity to make an informed, rational decision. I'm sure many people will prefer to be ignorant or will choose to consciously support cruelty, but I hope not everyone wishes to behave barbarically.

AldoApache
18 Jan 2010, 2:50PM

Recommend? (10)
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Sure meat eating is also a luxury but the problem in regards to your question is it has evidently worked so far.

"As far as I'm aware vegetables, fruits, nuts, beans and grains are pretty widely available to all."

So if 6 billion people and rising decided to make it their primary food source the worlds agriculture infrastructure could cope? I very much doubt it, maybe it should be given a go and we can all see.

Also what do Vegans expect happen to the animals if they are no longer eaten or bred? for them all to go extinct?

---

mdow
18 Jan 2010, 2:50PM

Recommend? (17)
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Grumpy foreigner, B12 is not only found in meat. It is also found in plenty of other places, including most supplements. It's unfortunate you don't understand the difference between the necessary and sufficient.

---

ngavc
18 Jan 2010, 2:50PM

Recommend? (33)
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Few would pay much attention to animal rights campaigners at all were it not for the salacious advertising. That said - like the average joe; I will always eat meat, abhor deliberate animal cruelty, believe killing for slaughter should be quick, and love and spoil the shit out of my dog.

OZKT29B
18 Jan 2010, 2:51PM

Recommend? (4)
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SD

> and with cow farts contributing so enormously to climate change, isn't whether or not to become vegetarian quite a big player in that rather important debate?

Maybe we should change their diet, or just GM them up so they stop farting. That or eat them faster, before they can expel so much gas.

What's to be done, though, about all the hot air expelled by Mr Schonfeld and his supporters here?

AntiTerrorist
18 Jan 2010, 2:52PM

Recommend? (6)
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> ants have systematic slavery

Aren't most bee's slaves, and I am pretty sure though not positive Vegitarians have no problem eating their hard worked for honey.

mdow
18 Jan 2010, 2:54PM

Recommend? (15)
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Aldo apache, the lowest estimate I could find for input/output ratio is 2:1, meaning at least two pounds of grains were needed for every pound of meat produced. At a minimum. I've seen numbers much higher than that as well. So your argument falls completely flat--if we were not wasting crops as inputs to meat, we could feed far more people.

ngavc
18 Jan 2010, 2:54PM

This comment has been removed by a moderator. Replies may also be deleted.

ArecBalrin
18 Jan 2010, 2:55PM

Recommend? (8)
Report abuse
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Animal rights activists lose the argument when they run roughshod over human rights in pursuit of their cause: what liberal society ever considered 'an eye for an eye' to be the basis for equality?

Then there is the equality question itself: most animals are harmed by other animals, not humans. Why so selective?

In one sense I'm reminded of anti-abortionists: they'd rather ban abortion and it will still happen instead of encourage contraception and it will happen less. Animal rights activists would rather ban(effectively) eating meat and it will still happen, when the alternative is to promote human well-being and the decline in animal suffering will naturally follow.

But no, they choose the ineffective absolutist route.

gwillikers
18 Jan 2010, 2:56PM

Recommend? (17)
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Where animal "rights" activists have gone wrong is by pretending that their own personal beliefs make them more moral or ethical than anyone else when it simply soesn't. Self-proclaimed morality is a yawner and turns people off. How about this unique thought: mind your own business and live your own life while we live ours. Pork roast tonight. Yum.

ALDOAPACHE --Vegans expect animals to work hard, keep their property nice and to be vegans.

GrumpyForeigner
18 Jan 2010, 2:57PM

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> Grumpy foreigner, B12 is not only found in meat. It is also found in plenty of other places, including most supplements. It's unfortunate you don't understand the difference between the necessary and sufficient.

I am an interested observant of the vegan scene in my country, and I have yet to see a supplement that is guaranteed to be animal free WRT B12 in our shops or online shops.

In India there are populations that live and thrive on a vegan diet; however, the source of B12 for them seems to be... less than perfect... hygienic circumstances, ie., they receive enough because they don't clean their vegetables to the degree that is considered necessary in the west - yuck! Hence, I understand every vegan who tosses in the supplements, no questions asked (something our local vegans call "unavoidability").

tonkatsu
18 Jan 2010, 2:57PM

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I'm a vegetarian myself - but do you not think that such black and white philosophies about what one is allowed to eat or not are problematic...

For example the popularity of peanuts has caused all kinds of horror in the world; also many people in third world countries cannot afford vegetarianism.

Damntheral
18 Jan 2010, 2:58PM

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Anyone who campaigns for "animal rights" as opposed to animal welfare is doomed to not being taken seriously. It is an absurd concept.

Numbed
18 Jan 2010, 2:59PM

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the biggest problem is people not understanding or acknowledging where their food comes from and what it costs not only the environment, but the farmer and the animals as well.

I'm a vegetarian and my reasoning is that I can't abide the mass-factory production of cheap meat -it's cruel and incredibly bad for the einvironment.

However, I support local farms that produce meat in responsible ways and minimise the impact of animal distress.

huge demand and consumption of meat is a problem for the environment and may well be the way forward for animal rights.

perhaps those that don't care about the lives and deaths of animals or prefer to remain ignorant to animal processing will care about habitat destruction for grazing lands, high methane levels in the atmosphere and the carbon costs of meat transportation...

AldoApache
18 Jan 2010, 3:06PM

Recommend? (0)
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mdow
18 Jan 2010, 2:54PM

What arguement mdow? I am merely making observations and offering my own opinion that is subject to change on the information and knowledge available to me.

Fair enough if that is what your link says.

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