

I was wrong about veganism. Let them eat meat – but farm it properly

The ethical case against eating animal produce once seemed clear. But a new book is an abattoir for dodgy arguments



George Monbiot

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This will not be an easy column to write. I am about to put down 1,200 words in support of a book that starts by attacking me and often returns to this sport. But it has persuaded me that I was wrong. More to the point, it has opened my eyes to some fascinating complexities in what seemed to be a black and white case.

In the Guardian in 2002 I discussed the sharp rise in the number of the world's livestock, and the connection between their consumption of grain and human malnutrition. After reviewing the figures, [I concluded that veganism](#) "is the only ethical response to what is arguably the world's most urgent social justice issue". I still believe that the diversion of ever wider tracts of arable land from feeding people to feeding livestock is iniquitous and grotesque. So does the book I'm about to discuss. I no longer believe that the only ethical response is to stop eating meat.

In [Meat: A Benign Extravagance](#), Simon Fairlie pays handsome tribute to vegans for opening up the debate. He then subjects their case to the first treatment I've read that is both objective and forensic. His book is an abattoir for misleading claims and dodgy figures, on both sides of the argument.

There's no doubt that the livestock system has gone horribly wrong. Fairlie describes the feedlot beef industry (in which animals are kept in pens) in the US as "one of the biggest ecological cock-ups in modern history". It pumps grain and forage from irrigated pastures into the farm animal species least able to process them efficiently, to produce beef fatty enough for hamburger production. Cattle are excellent converters of grass but terrible converters of concentrated feed. The feed would have been much better used to make pork.

Pigs, in the meantime, have been forbidden in many parts of the rich world from doing what they do best: converting waste into meat. Until the early 1990s, only 33% of compound pig feed in the UK consisted of grains fit for human consumption: the rest was made up of crop residues and food waste. Since then the proportion of sound grain in pig feed has doubled. There are several reasons: the rules set by supermarkets; the domination of the feed industry by large corporations, which can't handle waste from many different sources; but most important the panicked over-reaction to the [BSE](#) and [foot-and-mouth](#) crises.

Feeding meat and bone meal to cows was insane. Feeding it to pigs,

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whose natural diet incorporates a fair bit of meat, makes sense, as long as it is rendered properly. The same goes for swill. Giving sterilised scraps to pigs solves two problems at once: waste disposal and the diversion of grain. Instead we now dump or incinerate millions of tonnes of possible pig food and replace it with soya whose production trashes the Amazon. Waste food in the UK, Fairlie calculates, could make 800,000 tonnes of pork, or one sixth of our total meat consumption.

But these idiocies, Fairlie shows, are not arguments against all meat eating, but arguments against the current farming model. He demonstrates that we've been using the wrong comparison to judge the efficiency of meat production. Instead of citing a simple conversion rate of feed into meat, we should be comparing the amount of land required to grow meat with the land needed to grow plant products of the same nutritional value to humans. The results are radically different.

If pigs are fed on residues and waste, and cattle on straw, [stovers](#) and grass from fallows and rangelands – food for which humans don't compete – meat becomes a very efficient means of food production. Even though it is tilted by the profligate use of grain in rich countries, the global average conversion ratio of useful plant food to useful meat is not the 5:1 or 10:1 cited by almost everyone, but less than 2:1. If we stopped feeding edible grain to animals, we could still produce around half the current global meat supply with no loss to human nutrition: in fact it's a significant net gain.

It's the second half – the stuffing of animals with grain to boost meat and milk consumption, mostly in the rich world – which reduces the total food supply. Cut this portion out and you would create an increase in available food which could support 1.3 billion people. Fairlie argues we could afford to use a small amount of grain for feeding livestock, allowing animals to mop up grain surpluses in good years and slaughtering them in lean ones. This would allow us to consume a bit more than half the world's current volume of animal products, which means a good deal less than in the average western diet.

He goes on to butcher a herd of sacred cows. Like many greens I have thoughtlessly repeated the claim that it requires 100,000 litres of water to produce every kilogram of beef. Fairlie shows that this figure is wrong by around three orders of magnitude. It arose from the absurd assumption that every drop of water that falls on a pasture disappears into the animals that graze it, never to re-emerge. A ridiculous amount of fossil water is used to feed cattle on irrigated crops in California, but this is a stark exception.

Similarly daft assumptions underlie the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's famous claim that livestock are responsible for 18% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, a higher proportion than transport. Fairlie shows that it made a number of basic mistakes. It attributes all deforestation that culminates in cattle ranching in the Amazon to cattle: in reality it is mostly driven by land speculation and logging. It muddles up one-off emissions from deforestation with ongoing pollution. It makes similar boops in its nitrous oxide and methane accounts, confusing gross and net production. (Conversely, the organisation greatly underestimates fossil fuel consumption by intensive farming: its report seems to have been informed by a powerful bias against extensive livestock keeping.)

Overall, Fairlie estimates that farmed animals produce about 10% of the world's emissions: still too much, but a good deal less than transport. He also shows that many vegetable oils have a bigger footprint than animal fats, and reminds us that even vegan farming necessitates the large-scale killing or ecological exclusion of animals: in this case pests. On the other hand, he slaughters the claims made by some livestock farmers about the soil carbon they can lock away.

The meat-producing system Fairlie advocates differs sharply from the one now practised in the rich world: low energy, low waste, just, diverse, small-scale. But if we were to adopt it, we could eat meat, milk and eggs (albeit much less) with a clean conscience. By keeping out of the debate over how livestock should be kept, those of us who have advocated

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AllyF 6 September 2010 8:09PM C Recommend? (204) Report abuse | Link
Cattle are excellent converters of grass but terrible converters of concentrated feed. The feed would have been much better used to make pork.
Pigs, in the meantime, have been forbidden in many parts of the rich world from doing what they do best: converting waste into meat.

Excellent news. Pass me a bacon buttie.

Nice new photo, George. Very distinguished.

Rebeccatheyounger 6 September 2010 8:09PM C Recommend? (148) Report abuse | Link
Which would all be lovely if all animals were fed on 'waste' and led lovely lives frolicking merrily around picturesque meadows. This simply isn't the case. Plus, I don't particularly want to eat something that has had its life prematurely terminated so that I can shove its charred remains down my throat.

ThePaladin 6 September 2010 8:10PM C Recommend? (501) Report abuse | Link
You know what. It takes stones to post a retraction of previous arguments you've made, George, but if that book is accurate then I guess common sense has won out.
Did you seriously think it took 100,000 litres of water to produce a kilogram of beef, though?

UnashamedLibertarian 6 September 2010 8:11PM C Recommend? (147) Report abuse | Link
And rightly said. Although many vegans- and I don't thing you'll have fallen for this as you're way too intelligent- subscribe to the fallacy that all land can have crops on. Which, as the Highlands in the UK proves, isn't the case. In the UK, meat is actually farmed as little as possible and crops are grown wherever they can be as they are more profitable. Only in the worst circumstances does pastoral agriculture take place.

UnashamedLibertarian 6 September 2010 8:12PM C Recommend? (17) Report abuse | Link
Oh yes, and as AllyF says- nice photo. It does you justice.

petrifiedprozac 6 September 2010 8:14PM C Recommend? (119) Report abuse | Link
The point of the argument seems 'Let's be sensible.' However, that is not going to happen in the free market where profits today are more important than sustainability or altering the market for foodstuff to what can be sensibly produced.

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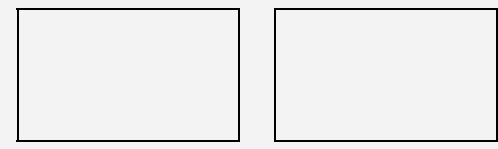
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**ThePaladin**

6 September 2010 8:16PM

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Plus, I don't particularly want to eat something that has had its life prematurely terminated so that I can shove its charred remains down my throat.

I hate to make the point because it's always lost on vegans or vegetarians but you're pretty much doing the same thing to plants. Some of the animals we eat are barely smarter than rocks. Chickens in particular are vicious ex-dinosaurs with the temperament of a rowdy herd of chavs.

I expect most beef cattle that are reared like they should be (in a field somewhere, happily chewing cud and grass) have a spectacularly lovely life compared to the half starving, so called free buffalo that wander the savannah's perpetually terrified of every passing scrub.

**CarefulReader**

6 September 2010 8:16PM

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Good news, George. And +1 for the graciously done mea culpa.

**TheldiotsAreWinning**

6 September 2010 8:18PM

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Does this mean I can eat meat again?

They are similar reasons I had for turning vegetarian, but I always said I'd go back to eating meat if it was locally raised, organic, free range etc. i.e. when I am much richer than I am now.

**SD1000**

6 September 2010 8:18PM

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Fascinating piece.

If only there were any chance of changing the way things are done in the meat industry...

**thesewoodenideas**

6 September 2010 8:19PM

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Has Boris Johnson been charming you again?

**BBCee1**

6 September 2010 8:19PM

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WTF ?

Is an animal's only worth its contribution to human nutrition ?

Typical upper class environmentalism. Shoot first, ask questions later.

**saintzeno**

6 September 2010 8:20PM

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I gotta go with Ally here.

it really was a bacon buttie that did it; wasn't it, George?

There's no shame in joining the rest of us failures who have seriously good, ecologically sound, reasons for eating meat! No, really, we do.

nicita

6 September 2010 8:22PM

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Even though it is tilted by the profligate use of grain in rich countries, the global average conversion ratio of useful plant food to useful meat is not the 5:1 or 10:1 cited by almost everyone, but less than 2:1.

I don't beleive it. Taht is no more credible than the 10000 litres of water story. Sources?

Also, it's not just about resources....should be less humans anyway.... it's about CRUELTY



Dunnyboy
6 September 2010 8:25PM

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Vegetarians, if you think it's immoral to eat meat because animals have rights as sentient beings, fine. Just don't try to convince us it's about saving the planet as well, OK?



Clunie
6 September 2010 8:25PM

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ThePaladin:

Some of the animals we eat are barely smarter than rocks. Chickens in particular are vicious ex-dinosaurs with the temperament of a rowdy herd of chavs.

Though many omnivores do get awfully het up at the idea of people elsewhere enjoying sharks fin soup, whale, dolphin, dog or cat meat, but as far as I'm aware those animals are either less smart than or on an intellectual par with pigs - there's an awful lot of hypocrisy around. Some say it's the manner of killing, but slaughter's slaughter and abattoirs aren't cuddly pleasant places.

And if stupidity is an excuse for eating things, I've met some eminently edible people - isn't the argument about sentience rather than intellect?



nega9000
6 September 2010 8:26PM

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Now this I could get used to reading. Monbiot columns that don't give me nightmares about the short and brutal future that lies ahead.

So George, have you taken to eating me again? How was it?

And I'm not sure about the new pic. Makes you look like a music teacher.



Peason1
6 September 2010 8:27PM

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Hat tip to the man who can publicly admit he was wrong.

I was a veggie for about 5 years in my youth. Thought I'd got it sussed. Thought I was morally one-up.

Then I started to realise that the world was a tad more complicated and some of the things I thought I was sure about I began to doubt.

And it was Christmas turkey that finally got me closely followed by an avalanche of bacon sandwiches.



BurgermaS
6 September 2010 8:28PM

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ThePaladin
6 September 2010 8:28PM

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but as far as I'm aware those animals are either less smart than or on an intellectual par with pigs - there's an awful lot of hypocrisy around

I haven't eaten a pig in nearly six years. That means no bacon, no pork, no sausages, nothing.

That's not a joke. I am one of the so called omnivores who does eat based on relative intelligence. I wouldn't eat my dog, so I won't eat bacon.



petrifiedprozac

6 September 2010 8:30PM

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nicita

Also, it's not just about resources....should be less humans anyway.... it's about CRUELTY

This is a stupid argument if you are merely referring to humans eating meat as cruelty. Animals should be reared in good conditions and without cruelty but to insist people shouldn't eat meat is ridiculous. Humans are part of the natural world where killing for food is normal. It's a case of not over consuming and living sustainably.



AllyF

6 September 2010 8:32PM



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And if stupidity is an excuse for eating things, I've met some eminently edible people?

I've been making this argument for years, but they still want let me eat Tories, and I've definitely met smarter pigs than some of them.



CarefulReader

6 September 2010 8:34PM

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That's not a joke. I am one of the so called omnivores who does eat based on relative intelligence. I wouldn't eat my dog, so I won't eat bacon.

Obviously you have to put the line somewhere, but that's a peculiar place to put it. The intelligence of a cow is much closer to the intelligence of your dog or your pig than it is to the intelligence of either a human or a carp, or a grasshopper.



TwistedBlood

6 September 2010 8:34PM

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George, nice article.

Those of you bleating about cruelty, perhaps read the thing? It's not saying 'eating meat is morally right'; it's saying 'eating meat isn't as environmentally damaging as I thought'. You're missing the point.



gardinergreen

6 September 2010 8:34PM

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I really commend George Monbiot for reconsidering the evidence and changing his mind.

Green vegetarians should take the side of meat production that causes minimal harm to animals and destruction to the environment, that is sustainable, small-scale and socially fair. The 'plague on all meat' campaigning of some animal rights campaigners, however, risks entrenching the most environmentally destructive forms of farming.

It is not 'green' to find eating meat morally revolting.

And it's not necessarily wrong-headed, either. Note that Monbiot never says that he's giving up veganism, or says anything about anyone's diet choices.

TwistedBlood

6 September 2010 8:35PM

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Monbiot is a carnivore

Is this true, George? Nothing but meat? Blimey.



frangin
6 September 2010 8:35PM

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I once castigated you for condemning me in an email for sitting down to the same dinner as my father before me, and his before him. I wondered what you would say if you'd had the occasion to see the pyramid of oyster shells I encountered in 1983 under the deep beach solum of the Albert pub in North Queensferry; the detritus of thousands of poor-men's suppers; the protein of paupers. So, well done, George, for gallant backtracking. However, I still can't understand why you're wringing your hands over the under-supply of food, when the problem lies rather in the over-supply of humans. Have you noticed the panic that sets in when nations perceive that their population is declining? Capitalism needs growth and growth needs population growth to generate an expanding surplus. Ultimately, that's what needs addressing.



WorcsPhil
6 September 2010 8:35PM

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George, if we fed all your straw men to cattle, there'd be plenty of meat to go round.

Colin Tudge made the argument for a mixed agricultural system back in 2003 in *So Shall We Reap: the Concept of Enlightened Agriculture*.

It's still a good starting point.



tommacg
6 September 2010 8:35PM

[Recommend? \(27\)](#)

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Thanks for this, look forward to reading the book!

By keeping out of the debate over how livestock should be kept, those of us who have advocated veganism have allowed the champions of cruel, destructive, famine-inducing meat farming to prevail.

Never did I keep out of that debate. In fact I'm constantly vehement that animals should be treated better. I just still make it easier on myself by not eating anything with a face.



HansChristian
6 September 2010 8:36PM

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Clunie - the shark finning problem is horrendous but not because we should not eat shark meat (historically eaten throughout the Caribbean, where I live) but the way it is done, only taking the fin with no thought to the future of the species etc... If we only ate cow ankles and chucked the rest away I would be concerned about that too. But I think you knew this...

Really good article BTW, the less bullshit stats and canards out there the better. Look forward to reading the book.



tommacg
6 September 2010 8:38PM

[Recommend? \(49\)](#)

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Excellent news. Pass me a bacon buttie.

They're efficient for humans to use, so let's eat more of them. Poor logic..they're still treated like shit so you shouldn't eat them



Timvincible
6 September 2010 8:39PM

[Recommend? \(52\)](#)

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Alas, the chances of getting MacDonalds to start farming their cattle in an environmentally friendly, efficient and sustainable way are about as low as the



ThePaladin

6 September 2010 8:39PM

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I've been making this argument for years, but they still want let me eat Tories, and I've definitely met smarter pigs than some of them.

Do you really want to eat a Tory? I imagine it tasting very much like caviar and flatulence, as opposed to someone from Labour who would taste like terrified cattle.



1nn1t

6 September 2010 8:40PM

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Twenty years ago I used to spend my summers working on a tiny Italian hill farm and what I learnt there taught me that one must eat meat because it's the ecologically correct thing to do.

So now, please, can we all stop being sniffy about all those "inefficient" little farms that the Commons Agricultural policy has been sustaining in mainland Europe.



Malchemy

6 September 2010 8:40PM

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Fair play to you George, that you have the integrity to put this piece up and the capacity to take on board the new information and remake your position accordingly displays fundamental honesty, would that many more could display such honourable behaviour. Bravo sir!

I hope to to be able to change your mind about micro generation some day too. See my avatar for a preview ...



meravie

6 September 2010 8:40PM

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It's not necessarily so much about "cruelty" and "saving the planet" in many cases as it is about middle class, moral superiority. It's basically a free pass to be snide. I remember once a dreadful camping trip with an ex boyfriend and everyone around me was vegan and making remarks about how humans are animals and omnivores are essentially cannibals. This, followed by tirades about America being the most evil country on earth pretty much confirmed it for me - these people aren't making any logical decisions, they're just all for show and "I'm better than you" solar panel installations.



ThePaladin

6 September 2010 8:41PM

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Obviously you have to put the line somewhere, but that's a peculiar place to put it. The intelligence of a cow is much closer to the intelligence of your dog or your pig than it is to the intelligence of either a human or a carp, or a grasshopper.

If I'd keep it as a pet and it becomes part of the pack/family, then it's too smart to eat. Pigs make pretty good family pets, and they are smart enough. Cows are lucky if they know where they are at a given moment.



Clunie

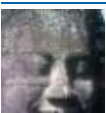
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AllyF: I just had this vision of a naked Norman Tebbit (he'd be helluva stringy) on a bed of lettuce with an apple in his gob. Thank you for the nightmare.



SamVega

6 September 2010 8:42PM

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Just because we don't like something doesn't mean we have to deny it to others, and just because we do, should not involve us ridiculing those who don't. I have been

vegan for nearly 30 years because I don't want to have animals killed for me to consume. I don't care what other people do, and I have never once in all that time attempted to persuade another person of the wisdom of my choice. Giving something up because you have a complicated theory about the economics of food production sounds a bit...*bloodless*. The only way successfully to resist the bacon sandwich is the internal squirm of morality. For those who don't feel it, good luck to you, and I am happy for you to consider this a disability on my part.



teaandchocolate

6 September 2010 8:42PM

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Better than that George - eat game.

They spend their (short) lives roaming around the woods and countryside. One pop and it's all over - or they escape....

You would be helping the countryside chaps keep their jobs and would be eating food that is home grown and actually very delicious.

And yes, naturally reared animals like free-range pig, chickens or boar do taste better.



teaandchocolate

6 September 2010 8:44PM

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AllyF: I just had this vision of a naked Norman Tebbit (he'd be helluva stringy) on a bed of lettuce with an apple in his gob. Thank you for the nightmare.

Thanks Clunie, it's a bit stormy and 'orrible here this evening. That image has just made me shiver.

He's bad enough when he smiles, is old Tebbit.



elizagregory

6 September 2010 8:45PM

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George

Your conclusion is far too broad. You have argued that there is no longer an environment imperative to be vegan, but appear to have assumed that no other arguments in support of veganism are worth considering:

But if we were to adopt it, we could eat meat, milk and eggs (albeit much less) with a clean conscience.

Most vegans would probably disagree. Meat, eggs and milk cannot be eaten with a clean conscience because they involve (1) various harms being done to animals which have 'rights' in view of the kind of beings they are and (2) the killing of animals. The environmental arguments, important though they are, are really nothing more than recent add-ons. The case for veganism stands firmly without them.

Now, if you turn round and say, "Well, alright. But I was clearly arguing solely on environment grounds and my conclusion needs to be interpreted (restricted) accordingly", then fine. Otherwise, you have have claimed too much.

In addition, it is not at all clear that a "just" or "non cruel" farming system is at all possible - even on a much smaller scale. It depends, of course, what is meant by "just", but also on an appreciation of what farming entails when looked at in detail. In general, I think that the so-called "humane" systems of farming are really a kind of fantasy destination which simply does not exist. Violence and suffering are inextricably linked to the production of animal-based foods on any reasonably large scale - and possibly even at the smallest ones, as well. Is it acceptable to abduct young calf from their mothers, de-horn cattle (read Ted Hughes' poem in Moortown Diary?), castrate animals, clips their ears with labels, wipe out 'sub standard' animals, milk cows on a daily basis (which kills cows early), skin them alive in slaughter houses (a common practice).....and, of course, kill them when they are extremely young, because that is when they taste best.

But if you know a way round all that, or find it all acceptable - then I suppose you might still be able to get away with your claim that we can eat animals with a clear conscience.....



Clunie

6 September 2010 8:46PM

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ThePaladin: I think political leaders from all the mainstream parties would be very well-fed, free range, organic - and far more use as food than anything else.



tony1
6 September 2010 8:49PM

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I think the issue here is not only about the efficient use of resources. Nor do I think it is about individual choice, as supermarkets and advertising constantly seem to insinuate. I think the real issue is this: how do we humans see and therefore treat other animals?

Of course, animals are nutrition, but they are also living entities. It's true that, in the natural world, eating and being eaten takes up a lot of time and effort. We could, and often do, just see ourselves as occupying the top of an inevitable food chain, able to position our mouths wherever is most convenient.

However, as a species, we are capable of thinking about our role in the world and capable of empathising with other species. We might decide not to eat meat (or not to eat it very often) not only because, rationally, we believe it is inefficient, but because, as ethical beings committed to civilised values, we want to minimise cruelty and suffering as far as possible, regardless of which species is on the receiving end.



Clunie
6 September 2010 8:49PM

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teaandchocolate:

Thanks Clunie, it's a bit stormy and 'orrible here this evening. That image has just made me shiver.

He's bad enough when he smiles, is old Tebbit.

Eeeeek, the Tebbit smile - made Christopher Lee's Dracula look like a harmless cuddly soul. I'm off to find my crucifix and garlic.



cbarr
6 September 2010 8:53PM

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Industrialize meat production fully and the issue of sustainability in both feed and water usage can be managed appropriately, its all this animals must be treated nicely stuff that leads to them being given food that could be eaten by people. Large scale factory farming is the most sustainable way to produce meat at the most efficient level.

I'm a bit of a hypocrite on the issue though as I couldn't contemplate eating dog (they're loyal, obedient and useful), elephants (They actually cry and grieve in a manner that makes them seem pretty emotionally intelligent) or penguins (incredibly funny animals potentially the entire of slapstick was based on them) anything else so long as it tastes good and is edible is fine.



undercurrent
6 September 2010 8:58PM

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Until most urban living species change their life styles and get some earth on their hands and shit on their boots, its highly unlikely that the majority in western societies will gain much enlightenment about growing food and raising animals.

The next best thing to do is to subscribe to The Land (edited by Simon Fairley) and try to understand the basic principles. Amen.



woman55
6 September 2010 8:59PM

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Ethically produced meat is expensive, even when bought from the farm. It is beyond the means of most of British people. I don't condemn people on low budgets that buy cheap meat; feeding a family on little money takes time, planning, skill and thought.

Ethically produced meat is a niche market product for those of us that can afford it and this situation will pertain for the foreseeable future.



6 September 2010 9:00PM

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OMG - as my seven year old would say. Looks like George is almost ready for an A* in adding up.

Monbiot made his name with global warming scaremongering - which is based almost exclusively on the idea that you must never add two figures together when you could multiply them instead.



Arkleseizure

6 September 2010 9:01PM

[Recommend? \(43\)](#)

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I note that no vegans or vegetarians here have answered the point about how no food can come with a 'no animals were harmed in the production of this meal' sticker. Serious question: is it okay for an arable farmer to lay snares to control rabbits on his lands, or shoot them? Or should he just let his crops get destroyed?

And if it's okay to lay snares, why is it wrong to then tuck into the by-product of crop defence?

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