

[Nonviolence/Environment: How Our Food Choices Affect the Entire Planet](#)

Category : [January/February/March 2011](#)

Published by dharmalingam on Nov. 26, 2010

Nonviolence/Environment

How Our Food Choices Affect the Entire Planet

Professor Peter Singer, Jim Mason and Michael Pollan

investigate the food chain behind three meals, challenging us to use our shopping dollars to effect global changes

In *The Ethics of What We Eat, Why Our Food Choices Matter* (Rodale, 2006), Professor Peter Singer and animal rights activist Jim Mason take the food-choice debate to a whole new collective level. Eating meat, poultry, fish and factory farmed dairy products not only contributes to animal abuse, but also environmental degradation, social injustice and climate change. The New York Times describes this book as "Vital, urgent and disturbing." We introduce each section in italics; the rest is from the book itself.

The Standard American Diet

Some Hindus think eating chicken or eggs is somehow more innocent than eating beef. They don't realize that factory chickens contribute to pollution, social injustice and gambling with dangerous microbes.

More than 600 million chickens a year are raised on the Delmarva Peninsula near Washington, D.C. The chickens produce more manure than a city of four million people. Nutrients in the manure wash off into the rivers and seep into the ground water. A third of shallow wells in the peninsula, including those going into the underground aquifer used for drinking water, have nitrate levels above safe drinking standards. Runoff has created a 100-mile-long "dead zone" in the Chesapeake Bay that cannot support fish, crabs, oysters or other species of ecological significance.

In 2000, a Kentucky citizen said, "My family lives next to chicken houses. The smell is nauseating. My son and I got stomach cramps, diarrhea, nausea. My son had intestinal parasites. Where are the children's rights? Should families have to sacrifice a safe, healthy environment for the economic benefit of others?"

In 1999, there was an investigation of seven deaths that occurred in Tyson operations. One was a 15-year old boy working as a chicken catcher in Arkansas. Investigators found another 15-year-old and two 14-year-olds in Tyson plants.

In October 2005, a United Nations task force identified as one of the root causes of the bird flu epidemic "farming methods which crowd huge numbers of animals into small spaces." After an outbreak of avian flu in Canada, University of Ottawa virologist Earl Brown said, "High-intensity chicken rearing is a perfect environment for generating virulent avian flu virus."

What's Happening to All the Fish?

Atlantic salmon is commercially extinct. Cod has become so scarce that there is a running joke in Massachusetts that Cape Cod will have to be renamed. A quarter of the world's commercially important ocean fish populations are depleted. Worldwide, humans are eating around 100 million tons of marine life each year.

Commercial fishing methods have become both more efficient and more wasteful. Bigger boats and bigger nets capture greater numbers of fish than ever before. But their gear damages the seabed and scoops up unwanted species--officially, "bycatch," but known at sea as "trash" and just thrown overboard, usually either dead or dying. Each year about a quarter of all fish taken worldwide is bycatch--that's some 27 million tons, billions of living creatures, trashed.

Where Did Your Milk Come From?

The modern dairy cow has been bred to produce as much milk as possible and now produces more than three times as much milk as a typical dairy cow did fifty years ago. The result is considerable stress on the cow's body. Writer Peter Lovenheim saw a cow give birth at Lawnel Farms in New York. Forty minutes later the calf was taken away, later died on a concrete floor and ended up on the farmer's compost pile. The lifespan of a cow is around 20 years, but dairy cows are usually killed by the age of eight.

"Happy Animal Meat"--Are We Sure?

A new breed of meat-eaters call themselves conscientious omnivores. They vote against industrial food, but eat meat from "animal friendly farms." But Singer and Mason ask, "Is the treatment really humane?"

A 2004 undercover video taken in Postville, Iowa, shows what can happen when inspectors are not present. AgriProcessors, Inc. is a kosher slaughterhouse, which means that it kills animals in accordance with orthodox Jewish dietary law. In theory, fully conscious kosher slaughtered animals should die in a few seconds after having their throat cut with a single slash of a sharp knife. In the video, however, cattle who have had their throats cut and their tracheas removed still thrash around for a long time before they die. Some struggle to get to their feet--and even succeed in standing up. Workers wait for the animal to collapse. One animal goes so far as to stagger off to another area before collapsing. Two more cattle come down the killing line and have their throats cut before this one is finally hoisted off its feet and dragged away.

Since inspectors are not assigned to the point of kill in any US slaughterhouses, or at animal friendly farms, it is probable that anyone who eats meat will, unknowingly, from time to time be eating meat that comes from an animal who died an agonizing death. [See: www.humanemyth.org]

Better Choices: Organic, Local, Vegan

The authors show us that organic, non-genetically modified food, grown locally, affects more than just our health. Choosing organic is good for Mother Earth and protects agricultural workers from toxic exposure. The authors dismantle objections to a vegan diet and show that vegan mothers can bear healthy children.

An acre of land used for crops will feed about ten times as many people as an acre of land used for grass-fed beef. In the US alone, 300 million acres are dedicated to grazing. [This does not include land for corn and soy to feed cows, pigs and chickens living on feed lots or in cages.] If there were no demand for meat or any other animal products, that would release significant land from agriculture. If this land were returned to forest, we would restore habitat for countless species of wild animals and birds. It would also lower world demand. This could slow down or end the clearing of tropical forests and stop the trend to develop factory farming in countries such as China. The typical US diet, about 28 percent of which comes from animal sources, generates 1.5 tons more carbon dioxide per person per year than a vegan diet with the same number of calories. So, a vegan diet is an effective way to

reduce one's contribution to climate change.

Gandhi remarked that the greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way it treats its animals. We should boycott those who treat animals, the environment and workers callously.

Michael Pollan's masterful writing style and breadth of research combines ecology, biology, history and anthropology with personal experience. Though he reluctantly ends up with a feeble defense of meat-eating, his books are compellingly educational and also provide non-fiction adventure. They will make readers stop and think before buying factory raised flesh or processed foods.

Problem: We Can Eat Almost Anything!

To one degree or another, the question of what to have for dinner assails every omnivore, and always has. When you can eat just about anything nature has to offer, deciding what you should eat will inevitably stir anxiety, especially when some of the potential foods on offer are liable to sicken or kill you. This is the omnivore's dilemma. My premise is that like, all creatures, humans take part in a food chain, and our place in that food chain, or web, determines to a considerable extent what kind of creature we are. Each of this book's three part's follows one of the principal human food chains from beginning to end: from plants photo synthesizing calories in the sun, all the way to the dinner table. Reversing the chronological order, I start with the industrial food chain, which concerns us the most.

From Food Culture to Food Science

The sheer novelty and glamour of the Western diet, with its seventeen thousand new food products every year and the marketing power--thirty-two billion dollars a year--used to sell us those products, has overwhelmed the force of tradition. Nutriitionism, which arose to help us better deal with the problems of the Western diet, has largely been co-opted by it: used by the industry to sell more nutritionally "enhanced" processed food and to undermine further the authority of traditional

food cultures that stand in the way of fast food.

Pollan's 2010 bestseller, *Food Rules*, provides simple keys to food choices. Skip his recommendations on flesh, but put the rest to work and you will have a better life and contribute to a planetary upgrade. Here is a selection from his 64 food rules.

Eat Food

2) Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food. 3) Avoid food products containing ingredients that no ordinary human would keep in the pantry. 4) Avoid food products that contain high-fructose corn syrup. 6) Avoid food products that contain more than five ingredients. 7) Avoid food products containing ingredients that a third-grader cannot pronounce. 8) Avoid food products that make health claims. 11) Avoid foods you see advertised on television. 12) Shop the peripheries of the supermarket and stay out of the middle. 13) Eat only foods that will eventually rot. 14) Eat foods made from ingredients that you can picture in their raw state or growing in nature. 17) Eat only foods that have been cooked by humans. 19) If it came from a plant, eat it; if it was made in a plant, don't. 20) It's not food if it arrived through the window of your car. 21) It's not food if it's called the same name in every language. (Think Big Mac, Cheetos or Pringles.)

Mostly Plants

22) Eat mostly plants, especially leaves. 25) Eat your colors. 26) Drink the spinach water. 30) Eat well-grown food from healthy soil. 31) Eat wild foods when you can. 33) Eat some foods that have been predigested by bacteria or fungi. 35) Eat sweet foods as you find them in nature. 36) Don't eat breakfast cereals that change the color of the milk. 37) "The whiter the bread, the sooner you'll be dead." 38) Favor the kinds of oils and grains that have traditionally been stone-ground. 39) Eat all the junk food you want as long as you cook it yourself. 41) Eat more like the French, Japanese, Italians, Greeks.

Not too Much

44) Pay more, eat less. 45) ...Eat less. 46) Stop eating before you're full. 47) Eat when you are hungry, not when you are bored. 49) Eat slowly. 52) Buy smaller plates and glasses. 53) Serve a proper portion and don't go back for seconds. 54) "Breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince, dinner like a pauper." 55) Eat meals. 56) Limit your snacks to unprocessed plant foods. 57) Don't get your fuel from the same place your car does. 58) Do all your eating at a table. 60) Treat treats as treats. 62)

Plant a vegetable garden if you have the space, a window box if you don't. 63)
Cook. 64) Break the rules once in a while.