

LETTER TO WORLD CITIZENS

6/1, Feb '92

Vegetarianism Is Consistent with Our Principles

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This month I want to write about killing - the killing of animals.

When I declared myself a world citizen in 1948, I decided that such status entailed not being a party to the killing of animals for my food. At that time, I was not aware of the health reasons for refraining from meat-eating. Nor did I know then what I know now about the environmental, economic and spiritual benefits of eliminating flesh from my diet.

I became a vegetarian in order to be fair. My reasoning went like this: I don't want to be killed and eaten for another's palate so, out of fairness, I must extend that principle to other species. Moreover, since I knew I could not perform such killing myself, I refused to collude in the killing by others.

Also, helping to preserve animal life is consistent with the very concept of world citizenship. If world peace was the goal and world citizenship was the means, then I had to become peaceful myself, a microcosm of the macro condition of peace I sought for all humanity. To continue to collude with murder - for what else is the deliberate slaughter of millions of animals daily? - was to contradict my own peaceful attitude and thus to forfeit my claim to world citizenship.

The longer one refrains from meat-eating, the more one is appalled by public ignorance on this vital subject. Millions of good, sincere people never give a thought to the right of their fellow animals to live, but instead blithely condone this mass slaughter by consuming flesh. I will never forget the advice of Yogi Bagan who exclaimed to an audience in Maine, "If you insist on eating flesh, start with yourself!" He concluded his talk by saying, "The human body was not meant to be a cemetery for other animals."

What does abstinence from meat-eating have to do with world **biopolitics**? Everything. A Penobscot medicine man, the Bear, once told me in OldTown, Maine, that humanity was experiencing so many ecological disasters precisely because we were killing off the animals. "Nature is fighting back," he said.

Let's first consider the spread of deserts in many parts of the world.

In Harvey Diamond's shocking yet absorbing book, *Your Heart, Your Planet* (Hay House, Inc., Santa Monica, Ca., 1990), I learned that 85 percent of topsoil loss is directly associated with livestock production. "Clearing the land for livestock grazing causes it to be blown away in the wind and washed away in our rivers," Diamond explains. "Soil erosion," he adds, "is the most serious threat to our planet at present."

The United Nations Environmental Program reports that 15 million acres of arid regions are turned into unreclaimable desert every year. More than one-third of the North American continent's dry land has suffered "severe" desertification according to the U.S. Council on Environmental Quality. The cause? "Overgrazing...has been the most potent desertification force, in terms of total acreage affected, within the United States."

"Our appetite for animal products" concludes Diamond, "is wiping out our trees, fouling our water, polluting our air, gobbling up our natural resources, and decimating our land. The unbearable irony is that these activities are for the purpose of supplying products that are also killing our people." Heart disease and other ailments have been shown to be associated with the cholesterol derived from animal products.

Ironically, many passionate environmentalists are heavy meat-eaters. Don't they realize that **ungrazed** forests are one of the only places where topsoil erosion is not a problem? From Diamond's book, I learned how trees build and protect the topsoil, how they absorb carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen, thus protecting the environment...and humans.

Clearing the forests to graze livestock for eating is environmental suicide. According to the Worldwatch Institute, floods in Bangladesh, hurricanes in Central America and locust plagues in Africa are among the effects of climate changes that have been caused by forest clearing. (See the article on a recent Worldwatch report elsewhere in WCN.) A side effect is the over 10 million environmental refugees forced to evacuate areas where they can no longer find enough food, potable water or means of support.

But the consequences are graver still. The greenhouse effect, greatly aggravated by forest clearing, could eventually melt the Arctic and Antarctic ice caps, thus causing calamitous flooding in many low-lying parts of the world.

Then there is the energy -conservation issue. The power requirements of the animal products industry represent a titanic, unrelenting drain on the world's energy resources. In the United States alone, 1.2 billion acres are used to grow feed for livestock, compared to the 60 million acres used to grow food for human consumption. The 20 times larger amount of land given over to livestock feed would encompass 24 states, while the area reserved for growing food for humans would equal a land mass about the size of Oregon. And what about the enormous quantities of fertilizer and water required to make this land productive? In addition, the excrement from the six billion animals slaughtered yearly in the United States acts as a devastating source of water pollution.

Space does not permit me to detail the energy usage related to processing (the act of slaughtering), to refrigerated storage (which incidentally contributes to Earth's ozone layer depletion), and to packaging and distribution to retailers..

Do you begin to get the picture? If we love and want to preserve our world, what we eat every day has an effect - either negative or positive. In the words of Richard Rice, a resource economist with the Wilderness Society, "Cattle are the scourge of the Earth." And world-renowned conservationist John Muir likened cattle to "hooved locusts."

If killing fellow humans is morally reprehensible and socially criminal, then killing animals for the sake of our taste buds is equally reprehensible. Besides, it is suicidal, both environmentally and physically.

A true World Citizen is kind to all life...including animals'. Anything less is travesty.
