**Saving the Planet, One Meal at a Time**

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By Chris Hedges



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My attitude toward becoming a vegan was similar to Augustine’s attitude toward becoming celibate—“God grant me abstinence, but not yet.” But with animal agriculture as the leading cause of species extinction, water pollution, ocean dead zones and habitat destruction **2**, and with the death spiral of the ecosystem ever more pronounced, becoming vegan is the most important and direct change we can immediately make to save the planet and its species. It is one that my wife—who was the engine behind our family’s shift—and I have made.

A person who is vegan will save 1,100 gallons of water, 20 pounds CO2 equivalent, 30 square feet of forested land, 45 pounds of grain and one sentient animal’s life **1** every day.

Animal agriculture is responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than all worldwide transportation combined—cars, trucks, trains, ships and planes. **3** Livestock and their waste and flatulence account for at least 32,000 million tons of carbon dioxide (CO2) per year, or 51 percent of all worldwide greenhouse gas emissions.**4** Livestock causes 65 percent of all emissions of nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas 296 times more destructive than carbon dioxide.**5** Crops grown for livestock feed consume 56 percent of the water used in the United States.**6** Eighty percent of the world’s soy crop is fed to animals, and most of this soy is grown on cleared lands that were once rain forests. All this is taking place as an estimated 6 million children across the planet die each year from starvation and as hunger and malnutrition affect an additional 1 billion people.**7** In the United States 70 percent of the grain we grow goes to feed livestock raised for consumption.**8**

The natural resources used to produce even minimal amounts of animal products are staggering—1,000 gallons of water to produce 1 gallon of milk.**9** Add to this the massive clear cutting and other destruction of forests, especially in the Amazon—where forest destruction has risen to 91 percent **10**—and we find ourselves lethally despoiling the lungs of the earth largely for the benefit of the animal agriculture industry. Our forests, especially our rain forests, absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and exchange it for oxygen: Killing the forests is a death sentence for the planet. Land devoted exclusively to raising livestock now represents 45 percent of the earth’s land mass.**11**

And this does not include the assault on the oceans, where three-quarters of the world’s primary fisheries have been overexploited and vast parts of the seas are in danger of becoming dead zones.

We can, by becoming vegan, refuse to be complicit in the torture of billions of animals for corporate profit and can have the well-documented health benefits associated with a plant-based diet, especially in the areas of heart disease and cancer.

Richard A. Oppenlander in his book, “Comfortably Unaware: What We Choose to Eat Is Killing Us and Our Planet,” draws the terrifying scenarios that lie ahead unless we change what we eat. He notes that we can save more water by refusing to eat a pound of beef—which takes more than 5,000 gallons of water to produce **12**—than by not showering for a year and that half the water in the United States is used to sustain livestock. He writes:

Your contribution to pollution begins with what you decide to purchase to consume. It’s not just with the occasional purchase; it’s with every food item you eat, every day. With meat and animal products, the pollution associated with your choice is massive. In order to raise that animal for you to eat, there is baggage that silently comes along with it—silent to you, that is, although it speaks loudly elsewhere. In the United States alone, chickens, turkeys, pigs, and cows in factory farms produce over five million pounds of excrement per minute. These are the animals raised each year so that people can continue eating meat, and they produce 130 times more excrement than the entire human population in our country. This manure sewage is responsible for global warming, water and soil pollution, air pollution, and use of our resources. The waste produced by the animals raised for food includes with it all the antibiotics, pesticides, herbicides, hormones, and other chemicals used during the raising and growing process. Accompanying this is methane released by the animals themselves, as well as the carbon, nitrous oxide, and additional methane emissions produced during the whole raising, feeding, and killing process.

On any given acre of land we can grow twelve to twenty times the amount in pounds of edible vegetables, fruit, and grain as in pounds of edible animal products. We are essentially using twenty times the amount of land and crops and hundreds of times the water, as well as polluting our waterways and air and destroying rainforests, to produce animals to kill and eat … which is unhealthier than eating the plant products we could have produced.

The animal agriculture industry has used the excuse of national security, public safety, trade agreements and the need for business secrets to pass what are known as ag-gag laws in about a dozen states and, on the federal level, the Animal Enterprise Protection Act, all enhanced with anti-terrorism laws to criminalize anyone who investigates or challenges the industry. It is illegal under the Patriot Act to issue statements or carry out actions that harm the profits of the animal agriculture industry. Radical change, as with every challenge to the power of our corporate state, will have to be built outside the structures of power, including the leading environmental groups, which have refused to confront the livestock industry.

Six members of the group Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) were found guilty in federal court in Trenton, N.J., in 2006 for using their website to incite attacks on Huntingdon Life Sciences, an animal-testing laboratory. They were charged with conspiracy to violate the Animal Enterprise Protection Act. One of those charged, Andrew Stepanian, who has since been released, was held in isolation in a federal “communication management unit.”

Given the slew of recent laws that prohibit the photographing or filming of how we handle our livestock, don’t expect to see very many pictures from within the vast warehouses where animals are kept in atrocious conditions as they await slaughter. Don’t expect politicians, bought off by agro-business money, to advocate for a diet that can have a massive impact on global warming. And don’t expect the mass media, which depend on advertising dollars from the industry, to inform us about what this industry is doing to the planet.

“Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret,” a new documentary, examines the power of the animal agriculture industry, which is one more massive piece of the puzzle in the corporate strangulation of the common good. The film attempts to let the public know not only about the environmental effects of animal agriculture but what is being done to and put into the food we eat.

“The animal agriculture industry is one of the most powerful industries on the planet,” journalist Will Potter says in “Cowspiracy.” “Most people in this country are aware of the influence of money and industry on politics. We really see that clearly on display with this industry in particular. Most people would be shocked to learn that animal rights and environmental activists are the No. 1 domestic terrorism threat according to the FBI. … They, more than any other social movements today, are directly threatening corporate profits.”

The film opens with Bruce Hamilton, the conservation director of the Sierra Club, laying out the dire future ahead of us. “The world’s climate scientists tell us that the highest safe level of emission is around 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases in the atmosphere,” he says. “We are already at 400. They tell us that the safest we could hope to do without having perilous implications as far as drought, famine, human conflict and major species extinction would be about a 2 degree Celsius increase in temperature. We are rapidly approaching that and with all the built-in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere we are going to easily exceed that. On our watch we are facing the next major extinction of species on the earth that we have not seen since the time of the dinosaurs disappearing. When whole countries go under water because of sea level rise, when whole countries find that there is so much drought they can’t feed their populations and as a result they need to desperately migrate to another country or invade another country, we are going to have climate wars in the future.”

“And what about livestock and animal agriculture?” asks Kip Andersen, who co-directed “Cowspiracy” with Keegan Kuhn. “Uhh,” Hamilton responds, “well—what about it?”

The refusal by major environmental organizations, including Greenpeace, 350.org and the Sierra Club, to confront the animal agricultural business is a window into how impotent the activist community has become in the face of corporate power.

I reached Kuhn in Berkeley and Andersen in San Francisco by phone.

“So many more people have a connection to animal agriculture, both in society and government, than have a direct connection to the oil industry,” Kuhn said. “The oil industry employs, relatively speaking, a very small percentage of people and is controlled by a very small percentage of people. The agricultural industry, both animal agriculture and commodity grains fed to those animals, involves a much bigger demographic. Politically it is a lot more challenging. Corporations such as Cargill, one the largest commodity food corporations in the world, is able to create U.S. policy. The government says it needs to have affordable food, which means giving massive subsidies to these corporations. The belief is that we have to eat animal products to survive. It is not something that is even questioned. The fossil fuel industry is more easily challenged with the argument that there are alternatives. People do not feel there is an alternative to eating animals.”

“Why would we want to create laws that make it harder for us to know how our food is produced?” Kuhn asked. “No consumer wants that. They want greater transparency. This shows how in-bed this industry is with the government. They can shape and dictate legislation that does not benefit us or the planet.”

“Hiding the animals, hiding the farms, hiding the entire issue is a marketing tool that is used by the industry,” Kuhn said. “Their attitude is, if you can’t see it, it’s not there. There are upwards of 10 billion farm animals slaughtered every year in the United States. But where are these 10 billion animals? We live in a country with 320 million humans. We see humans everywhere. But where are these billions of animals? They are hidden away in sheds. It allows the industry to carry out these atrocities, whether it’s how they treat the animals or how they treat the environment.”

“You also have the marketing of grass-fed animals on smaller farms,” Andersen said, “and while it initially appears better, it is actually worse. The factory farming is horrific for the animals, but it is better for the environment than pasture-fed beef because of methane emissions, feces excretion and all the horses and wolves that are killed so cattle can graze on public land, which we pay for with our public dollars. We didn’t focus in the film on the factory farms. Everyone knows about that. We wanted to look at these so-called sustainable farms, as if this so-called humane farming is the answer. In most situations, these farms are worse for the environment, although it is better for the animals.”

“If we had a different timeline, or if we had 1.5 billion people on the planet, then there might be halfway measures we could take,” Kuhn said. “The situation we are dealing with ecologically, however, means there is no way left but an immediate shift to a plant-based lifestyle.”

“How can we best use our resources?” Oppenlander asks in “Comfortably Unaware.” “What foods will have the very least effect on our planet? Which foods best promote our own human health and wellness, and which are the most compassionate? Do we really need to slaughter another living thing in order for us to eat? Or, sadly, is it because we want to?”

We have only a few years left, at best, to make radical changes to save ourselves from ecological meltdown. A person who is vegan will save 1,100 gallons of water, 20 pounds CO2 equivalent, 30 square feet of forested land, 45 pounds of grain, and one sentient animal’s life **13** every day. We do not, given what lies ahead of us, have any other option.

Footnotes:

1. “Water Footprint Assessment.” University of Twente, the Netherlands.

2. “What’s the Problem?” United States Environmental Protection Agency. “Livestock’s Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options.” Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. 2006.

3. Ibid.

4. Goodland, R; Anhang, J. “Livestock and Climate Change: What if the key actors in climate change were pigs, chickens and cows?” WorldWatch, November/December 2009. Worldwatch Institute, Washington, D.C., USA. Pp. 10-19.

5. “Lifestock’s Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options.” Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. 2006.

6. Jacobson, Michael F. “More and Cleaner Water.” In “Six Arguments for a Greener Diet: How a More Plant-Based Diet Could Save Your Health and the Environment.” Washington, D.C.: Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2006.

7. Oppenlander, Richard A. “Comfortably Unaware: What We Choose to Eat Is Killing Us and Our Planet.” New York City: Beaufort Books, 2012.

8. Ibid.

9. “Water Trivia Facts.” United States Environmental Protection Agency.

10. Oppenlander, Richard A. “Food Choice and Sustainability: Why Buying Local, Eating Less Meat, and Taking Baby Steps Won’t Work.” Minneapolis, MN: Langdon Street, 2013. Margulis, Sergio. Causes of Deforestation of the Brazilian Rainforest. Washington: World Bank Publications, 2003.

11. Thornton, Phillip, Mario Herrero, and Polly Ericksen. “Livestock and Climate Change.” Livestock Exchange, No. 3 (2011).

12. Pimental, D., Pimental, M. “Sustainability of meat-based and plant-based diets and the environment.” American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Vol. 78, 660s-663S, September 2003.

13. “Water Footprint Assessment.” University of Twente, the Netherlands.

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