Meat, Ethics, and Animal Husbandry

I was raised by a vegetarian mother and have adhered to vegetarian and vegan diets for much of my adult life. My mother’s vegetarianism is inspired by her innate distaste for meat and almost unnerving adoration of animals, while I strove for environmental righteousness. Most people have heard that a vegan diet is the most sustainable because the methane emitted by livestock contributes greatly to global warming and because it takes more land to raise animals than to grow vegetables. When my love of food and being outside drove me to pursue a career in organic farming, however, I began to wonder about my vegan pretensions. Now one of the few remaining meat-eaters (or “meat-ers” as my young niece calls me) in my family, I’m under constant moral scrutiny and so I’m using this profile as an opportunity to explore the issue further.

When I began to work on vegetable farms I was surprised to learn about the use of blood and bone meal (usually from pigs) and liquid fish (exactly what it sounds like) as fertilizers. This is a standard practice on organic vegetable farms in the US and in Canada. From what I’ve seen, there is no indication on the packaging of these processed fertilizers that the animals were raised and/or harvested sustainably or humanely. Furthermore, most farms that do not raise animals are importing manure from off the farm. Knowing that vegetable production was dependent on animal fertility, I wondered if there was a better way to integrate animals into our food system.

This was one of the questions explored by Michael Pollan in The Omnivore’s Dilema. The writer visits Joel Salutin’s farm, Polyface, and offers a revised understanding of meat production based on pasture rather than corn. Pollan and Salutin have become the poster boys of the farm-to-fork movement which sometimes seems to almost fetishize meat eating. I worry that the ubiquitous charcuterie platter is being dished out without its pastoral context.

People who promote rotational grazing as an environmentally regenerative practice claim that a well managed pasture has tremendous potential to build top soil, sequester carbon, and reverse desertification. As Jay Walljasper explains in his article “Down and Dirty,” the idea of holistic grazing was first posited by Allan Savoy, a biologist and game rancher in Zimbabwe. Savoy noticed that the land used by wild herds of hooved animals was always in much better shape than that used by farmers (Walljasper). He compared the way that domestic and wild herds
moved and found that wild herds stayed grouped closely together, heads down, eating and moving, while domestic herds tended to be spread out, standing and staring, occasionally picking. Savoy suggested that the dense and rapid movement of herds over the land helps to build soil in several ways. They flatten standing-dead plants (very common in drought-ridden areas), hastening decomposition. Their manure is more condensed and so fertilizes more consistently. The disturbance of the soil exposes seeds and allows them to germinate. Wild animals move quickly so that they do not mow the grass too short, allowing a longer and healthier root mass to survive. Farmers who can mimic this grazing pattern, Walljasper notes, have seen inches added to their top soil in only a few years.

In her grazing livestock stock class at Georgian College, Ontario farmer and teacher Tarrah Young, convinces farmers to experiment with holistic pasture management. Young cites farmer-activist Abe Collins’ calculations on the power of pasture:

> In 2000, total Carbon emissions were 44 gigatonnes worldwide. Increasing the Soil Organic Matter on the world’s 12 billion acres of rangeland by 0.5 % would sequester 720 gigatonnes of carbon. Through ‘holistic range management’, increases in SOM of 2% are quite achievable.....In other words, all our work to reduce emissions could be blown out of the water if we just grazed livestock correctly, or at all (Young, personal e-mail).

These are some of the factors she presents to her Georgian College class made up of mostly conventional farmers looking for profitable alternatives in an age of rising corn and oil prices. She also contests the idea that pasture takes up more land than corn-fed livestock noting that in New Zealand farmers “feed about the same number of cattle as there are dairy cows in the US, 7 times more sheep, plus 1 million deer and goats each, but they do it on a pasture area the size of Wisconsin” (Young, speaking notes). It also provides habitat for diverse species and much-needed year-long forages for bees. In a sense, a holistically managed pasture can act as miniature rain forest. “Tofu can’t do that” (Young, personal e-mail).

But what about the killing? In his succinctly named article, “The Least Harm Principle May Require That Humans Consume A Diet Containing Large Herbivores, Not A Vegan Diet”, Steven L. Davis explains that the frequent cultivation required for crops (usually once a week or more) ends up killing more animals than forage-based agriculture in which machinery is passed through the field comparatively seldom. Statistics on mortality of small field-dwelling mammals and reptiles is difficult; “because most of these animals have been seen as expendable, or not
seen at all, few scientific studies have been done measuring agriculture’s effects on their populations” (Kerasote 1993 qt Davis). Davis compiles data to estimate a mortality rate of 15 animals per hectar each year and multiplies it by 120 million hectares of cropland to conclude that 1.8 billion animals would need to be killed annually to feed a vegan America (Davis 390). In contrast, he predicts that the reduced use of equipment means that only half that number animals would be killed in pasture. Even when this is added to the animals slaughtered for consumption - 8.4 billion according to the USDA’s 2000 figures (Davis 391) -- and the number of large ruminants is doubled, a diet which combines forage and crop production still kills approximately 376 million fewer animals per year than the vegan model (Davis 391).

There are two points I am trying to make here. One is that corn-fed meat and holistically-grazed meat are different products with radically different impacts on the environment and can not be used equivocally in an argument for environmental veganism. This misunderstanding highlights the second point, for which I will borrow from Wendell Berry’s famous phrase: Eating is an agricultural act. When it comes to an ethical diet, or ethics of any kind, you can’t just pick an identity, wash your hands, and take a seat at the table. You have to engage, experience, and produce. You have to get your hands a bit dirty. You have to consider the small creatures that are killed and displaced from your garden every time you tear up the weeds. Is this an absurd and impossible expectation? I am reminded of the Portlandia sketch in which two hipsters at a restaurant ask the waitress to hold their table while they drive fifty miles to check out the farm producing the chicken featured on the menu. It seems ridiculous but so does our ignorance about food production.

In a lecture by Joel Salatin I attended at UBC several years ago, he remarked that before the Second World War, over fifty percent of vegetables were produced in backyard gardens. He insisted that households must renew their role in the economy as producers rather consumers to achieve a more sustainable food system. I feel particularly strong about this as my subject area, Family Studies (once Home Economics) has traded home preserving for label reading and is being re-dubbed Family and Consumer Studies in some parts of the USA.

The other reason I want to ethically justify raising meat is because I love working with animals. I love the subtle cues they give you about their well-being. I love how they can live and thrive on grass and water. I love that they can improve the world by eating and defecating. I am
amazed at how practical and simple and perfect they are. In “Renewing Husbandry,” poet, farmer, and philosopher Wendell Berry writes:

The word “husbandry” is the name of a connection. In its original sense, it is the name of the work of a domestic man, a man who has accepted a bondage to the household. To husband is to use with care, to keep, to save, to make last, to conserve. Old usage tells us that there is a husbandry also of the land, of the soil, of the domestic plants and animals—obviously because of the importance of these things to the household. And there have been times, one of which is now, when some people have tried to practice a proper human husbandry of the nondomestic creatures, in recognition of the dependence of our households and domestic life upon the wild world. Husbandry is the name of all the practices that sustain life by connecting us conservingly to our places and our world; it is the art of keeping tied all the strands in the living network that sustains us.

Berry calls for a spirit of husbandry -- of care and connection -- in an increasingly fragmentary culture of specialists. In a time where the majority of people live in cities and are divorced from the land that sustains them, he asks: “How can we restore a competent husbandry to the minds of the world’s producers and consumers?” I am still not convinced that eating animals is ethical despite all the bean and bunny counting. This kind of accounting, I think Berry would agree, forgets husbandry in favour of science. He also points to the element of trust and mystery that are implicit in husbandry and so I validate careful uncertainty and curiosity as ethical in itself.

Works Cited


Young, Tarrah. "no subject." Message to Shannon Duncan. 25 January 2013. E-mail.
