

Another Way to Protect Our Planet

By Charles Lamb

The December 2008 issue of The American Prospect magazine carried an interesting article by Ben Adler entitled “Are Cows Worse Than Cars?” Some of the points in the article are summarized below.

Eating one pound of beef is the equivalent of driving a Hummer for 30 miles, a Prius for 100 miles, or using a clothes dryer 15 times. Most committed environmentalists eat as much meat as people who deny that global warming is real, and don’t seem to realize how much pollution is caused by the beef industry.

A spokesperson for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has stated that one meat free day per week could reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 18%. A University of Chicago study has declared that one meat eater going vegetarian results in putting the equivalent of 1.5 fewer tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere annually.

Eating less meat would be easier than converting a country’s electrical grid to solar, wind, or nuclear energy. Nevertheless, you hear little mention of this solution by any environmental group.

Cattle release gases such as methane and nitrous oxide that are up to 30 times more damaging than carbon dioxide. Cattle ranching leads to deforestation as trees are cut for more land.

Meat eating has increased greatly in recent years. In 1950 the average American ate about 150 pounds of meat, poultry, and fish per capita per year. Today it is 200 pounds. Total meat consumption in the world has risen from 71 million tons in 1961 to 284 million tons in 2007.

According to the article, even feeble attempts to suggest less meat eating, not total vegetarianism, have been met with ferocious counter-attacks. And all the mainline environmental groups have avoided making it a primary educational issue, or even mentioning it at all. The article quotes spokespersons from the National Resources Defense Council, the League of Conservation Voters, and the Sierra Club explaining why this is true. Some say “one issue at a time” and others fear damage to alliances with hunters and ranchers.

For those most interested in stopping cruelty to animals, it is also noteworthy that the EPA has some documentation that reducing methane can be accomplished by letting animals out of confinement and not feeding them high-energy grains.

Much of the agricultural industry has not been forced to abide by the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts, and many violations have gone unpunished.

The article concludes that eating less meat is something each individual could determine to do without waiting for governmental action, and suggesting that if we really care about reducing greenhouse gasses our actions should show it. It does not call for vegetarianism, just for less consumption of meat and smaller portions.

I have the article in its entirety on file if you care to see it.