Chapter 6

Environmental Concerns and the Mainstreaming of Veganism

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ABSTRACT

Increasing awareness about the environmental consequences of consuming animal products together with recognition of animal rights and health benefits, has played a significant role in the rising interest in veganism. The chapter analyses recent trends in veganism in the Western world, focusing on the substantial environmental impact of animal agriculture being highlighted by respected agencies including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and widely read publications such as the Guardian and the New York Times. Growing awareness of the environmental impact of animal products and greater visibility of veganism in the mainstream media have assisted in veganism emerging as an important response to the environmental crisis.

There has been a huge change regarding veganism. When Animal Liberation first appeared [in 1975], you couldn’t use the word ‘vegan’ without an explanation. The Vegan Society in Britain had only 300 members. There was a US vegan group that was small. There has been an enormous difference, an interesting difference. I was surprised – if you had asked me in 1975, I would have said I think vegetarianism would spread, and it would have been at a higher level in the public than now. I would have been surprised veganism caught on to the extent that it has, (Singer, 2012).

INTRODUCTION

The damage being done to the earth’s environment as a result of rapidly increasing meat production and consumption is a central theme of this publication. Veganism emerges as one strategy that individuals can take to assist in combating this alarming situation. The term “veganism” initially referred to a diet
free of animal products when it was coined by Donald Watson in 1944 (The Vegan Society, 2012). In 1951, The Vegan Society redefined the concept to mean seeking 'to end the use of animals by man for food, commodities, work, hunting, vivisection and all other uses involving exploitation of animal life by man' (Cross, 1951). Both meanings are still often used and confusion over the use of the term still prevails in the media and within the animal advocacy movement. Nonetheless, veganism as a term and concept is increasingly evident in the media and in public consciousness. Articles in mainstream publications promoting veganism have assisted in spreading awareness and providing a much more viable environment for vegan advocacy (Munro, 2012, pp. 169, 173; Sneijder & te Molder, 2009, pp. 626, 628).

Growing awareness of the environmental consequences of consuming animal products, in addition to mainstream recognition of animal rights and health benefits, has played a significant role in the rising interest in veganism. Major reports by respected agencies, including the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (Steinfeld et al., 2006, p. 20) and the Worldwatch Institute, have warned about the enormous contribution that animal agriculture makes to worldwide greenhouse gas emissions (Goodland & Anhang, 2009). This chapter will examine the growth of veganism in the Western world, and the way in which its increasing profile has enabled wider recognition of the environmental and ethical benefits that it brings, with particular reference to the situation in Australia and the United States.

Snow (2004, p. 383) explains that social movements are ‘embroiled in conflict over competing claims about aspects of reality’. An important sociological concept in understanding social movements and social change is ‘claims-making’. ‘Claims makers are people who articulate and promote claims’ and their cause is benefited ‘in some way if the targeted audience accepts their claims as true’ (Ferrante, 2011, p. 167). Individuals and organisations encouraging people to become vegans are examples of claims makers. Carrie Freeman (2013, pp. 94, 109) notes that common claims made by vegan advocates are that it has benefits in terms of assisting non-human animals, the environment and human health (see, for example, ALV, 2012; PETA, 2011b).

Attracting media attention for such claims is important to successful claims-making (Ferrante, 2011, p. 169). Vegan advocates are now having more success in getting their claims heard, partly due to mainstream media being more receptive to a vegan message. This success has been strengthened by claims about environmental benefits of veganism emanating from sources outside the animal advocacy movement. When highly regarded institutions, like the United Nations, endorse claims commonly made by animal advocates, the perceived legitimacy of these claims increases (Williams, 2012, pp. 9-10). As a result of these supportive reports from respected organisations and their coverage in mainstream media, the impact of the consumption of animal products is getting increasing traction as an important environmental concern, not only within the animal advocacy movement, but in the wider public sphere.

This chapter will examine some articles published by widely read publications like the Guardian and the New York Times. Articles in these publications have been chosen due to their large reach, which extends well beyond animal advocates to a much more general audience (Boyd-Barrett, 2006, pp. 170-171). The fact that they are being included is significant: it demonstrates a belief within mainstream media that audiences have sufficient familiarity and interest in veganism to engage with the subject. Due to time and space constraints, media rarely present material with which their audience is unfamiliar (Flew, 2008, p. 11).

While veganism is increasingly entering the mainstream media and consciousness, attention has mainly focussed on a diet free of animal products, rather than the broader philosophy and lifestyle (Hill, 2011). This lifestyle involves an individual commitment to not only avoid eating animal products, but also to not participate in other instances of animal exploitation, such as the use of non-human animals