Chapter 17

Meat Production and Consumption: An Ethical Educational Approach

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the results of studies that unveil how meat and other animal derived products are causing severe environmental impacts, social problems and ethical concerns regarding both human and non-human animals. Although there are many ways to tackle the issue a critical non-anthropocentric education that encompasses ethics as a dimension of sustainability, is proposed. Traditional non-environmental education often legitimizes values that are averse to an ethic that could be described as correct regarding the relationship between humans and the other animal species and even many educational currents that call themselves “environmental” are guided by a shallow conservationist point of view. Although welfarist practices may in some contexts be of help, the authors propose the animal abolitionist perspective as the unique genuine foundation for education to build this new paradigm.

INTRODUCTION

There is now a consistent and increasing body of evidence that shows that meat and other animal production chains are destroying the foundations upon which life on Earth depends (e.g. the overview by (Raphaely & Marinova, 2014). This economic sector is dramatically threatening the cycle of renewable and non-renewable natural resources, such as water and topsoil, by polluting, damaging or guzzling resources at a rate with which biogeochemical cycles cannot cope. It is also causing and accelerating
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climate change, either directly by releasing greenhouse gases along the production chain or indirectly by triggering deforestation and substantial land use changes. Raising livestock, including for dairy and egg production, is also causing habitat loss and impoverishment, and is thus responsible for ravaging the planet’s biodiversity. Excessive meat consumption is further directly and indirectly negatively affecting human health (Raphaely & Marinova, 2014).

There is ample scientific evidence about the devastating impacts livestock has on the planet and its inhabitants, including humans. Despite this, consumption of meat and other animal products is considered a dietary norm across the globe. Is there a way to stop the destruction of the planetary and public health by overcoming people’s addiction to meat or ignorance about its impacts? Considered a very private act of consumption, external social pressure (such as dietary recommendations, perceived expectations by others, attempts to alter social norms or rewards) may not be very effective in changing what people eat; knowledge and beliefs however can alter and transform their diets (Patterson, Kristal & White, 1996). In order to provide a knowledge foundation for dietary change, this chapter starts with an overview of negative impacts of animal production and consumption on the planet and public health and then exposes the power of the livestock sector interested in maintaining the current meat trajectory. The second part of the chapter tackles the issue about the separation between human and non-human sentient beings and argues for a change in the beliefs people commonly hold about animals. Such changes could be achieved through an ethical educational approach. In fact, education has been found time and again to be the only socio-demographic variable exerting a consistent and significant influence on dietary changes (Srinivasan, 2006).

NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF MEAT PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

The monumental negative impacts of animal production and consumption affect both – the planet’s ecological environment and the health of human population. They are discussed below.

Livestock’s Monumental Ecological Footprint

Many important studies emerged in the last decade detailing livestock’s monumental ecological footprint and one of the most influential is the 2006 analysis by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations – *Livestock’s long shadow* (Steinfeld et al., 2006). This study reveals many serious negative externalities from the livestock sector, including impacts on climate change, water and biodiversity. Its contribution to climate change, estimated at 18 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions, is higher than that of transport (Steinfeld et al., 2006). Taking into account the direct effects along with the impacts of feed crop agriculture required for animal production and energy consumption, the study pointed out that the livestock sector is one of the top two or three main contributors to the most severe environmental problems at a local and global scale. It was identified as a key factor in deforestation, especially in Latin America, and the single largest anthropogenic user of land, accounting for 70 percent of all agricultural land and 30 percent of the land surface of the planet (Steinfeld et al., 2006). Most of the Red List threatened species suffer habitat loss and degradation in proximity to livestock (Steinfeld et al., 2006).

Several studies published since FAO’s analysis prove that there is no reason to believe that this iconic study overestimated livestock’s negative impacts. On the contrary, many studies indicate that FAO’s
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