

animals IN THE NEWS



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Main

Food and Drink

Chesapeake Bay crab license buy-back successful

12/07/2009




About the Author

Wendee Holtcamp has covered news about conservation, wildlife and adventure travel for nearly 15 years.

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*Virginia has a permit buy-back program to help recover the blue crab in Chesapeake Bay/
Credit NOAA's Estuarine Research Reserve Collection*

The Chesapeake Bay's blue crab population has plummeted, and the state of Virginia's Marine Resources Commission is buying back licenses from commercial crabbers in order to give the crabs a rest, and help their populations recover. But some crabbers aren't going for it. They've been doing this their whole lives, and love spending time on the open ocean, rain or shine.

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If the program works as planned, it will permanently retire – or in other words remove from the sea – 75,000 crab pots, a full fifth of crab pots currently used in Virginia’s waters. Both Virginia and Maryland, which border the Chesapeake Bay, have reduced the length of crabbing season, created sanctuaries off-limits to crabbers, and ended an age-old practice of raking the ocean floor for pregnant crabs. Virginia actually stopped giving out new licenses a decade ago, but although the blue crab has finally showed signs of possible recovery, reaching the highest level since 1993, the population is still at risk. So Virginia decided to try a permit buy-back program.

Virginia and Maryland received \$20 million from the federal government last year because the crab fishery was declared a disaster. Virginia got \$16.7 million of that. Each licensed crabbers can submit a bid to the state for how much they would need in order to retire their license. Virginia crabbers hold has 1,850 permits and 500 of them submitted bids by the November 1st deadline, which ranged from \$500 to \$600,000 and the maximum amount granted thus far was \$175,000.

The states have used some of the disaster money to rescue “ghost pots” – abandoned pots on the ocean floor that nevertheless continue to catch crabs and other marine life, which end up dying since no one retrieves them. I remember hearing about a program in Australia where one day a year, they close the crabbing fishery so unattended pots could be collected as “ghost crabbing” from abandoned crab pots kills many unintended species as well as crabs every year. I think that is a great program that should be implemented in many places!

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Eating Animals

11/26/2009

Maybe Thanksgiving isn't the best day to have a post on *Eating Animals*, or on eating animals, but then again maybe it is the best day. Jonathan Safran Foer, an acclaimed novelist, took on the topic in a book that promises to be as spellbinding as the [New York Times Magazine](#) feature spun from the book. It drew me in, captivated me with his humor and his insightfully told



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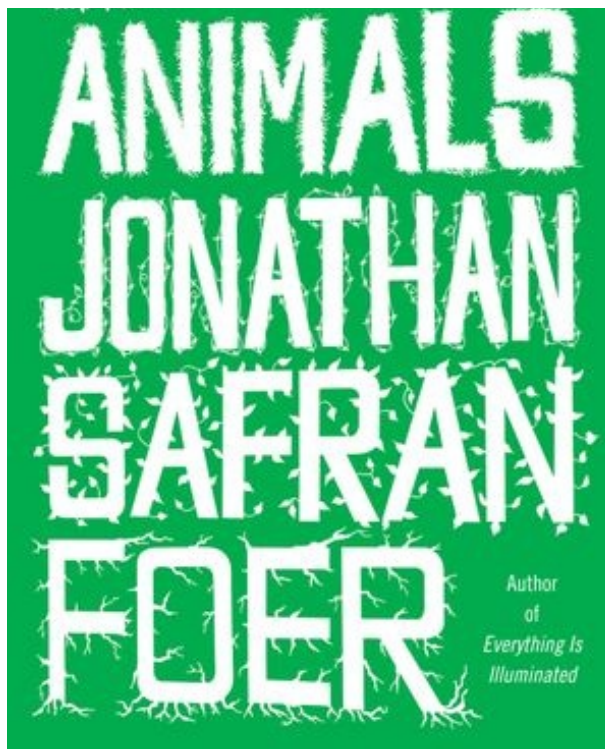
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captivated me with his humor and his insignificantly told stories. It was nothing like what I expected. Since I started this blog I have become increasingly aware of food issues as they relate to animals - after all, fish, cows, chicken, and pigs - the main animals we eat at least in North America - are animals (as Foer's vegetarian babysitter told him, "you do know that chicken is *chicken*?"). Most people, even those who love animals, eat animals.

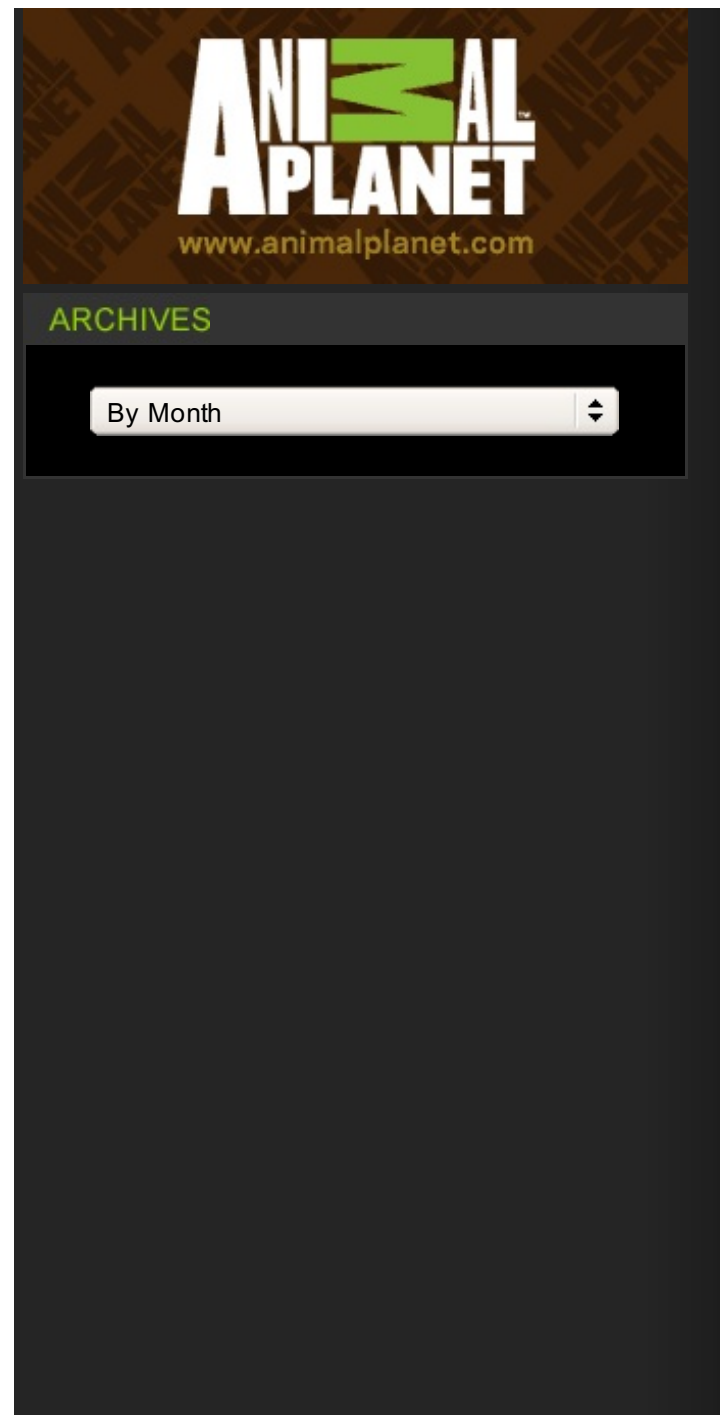
Foer was an on-again off-again vegetarian, as was the woman who would become his wife. But after their first son was born, everything changed. "Everything is possible again," his friend wrote to him. And he started thinking about just what kinds of things was he about to feed to his child. It became more than an intellectual endeavor, but a passion to find out the truth behind one of the biggest industries around. He visited factory farms, family farms, and talked to people on all sides. And throughout the book he tells funny stories, including how his Jewish grandmother had survived WWII scavenging in Eastern Europe, and what food represented to her: "The story of her relationship to food holds all of the other stories that could be told about her. Food, for her, is not food. It is terror, dignity, gratitude, vengeance, joy, humiliation, religion, history and, of course, love. It was as if the fruits she always offered us were picked from the destroyed branches of our family tree."



And what does he find? Foer says eating animals is making us sick. He shows how chickens and other poultry – including turkeys – in traditional factory farms live in horrendous, inhumane and disgusting conditions, cramped in windowless prisons, walking around in their own feces. They get injected with antibiotics daily, which affects our own health and immunity. Remember the old adage, you are what you eat. Foer brings attention to the fact that most "24-hour flus" are not actually influenza, but one of the 76 million cases of food-borne illness the [Centers for Disease Control](#) and Prevention has estimated happen in America each year.

"Your friend didn't "catch a bug" so much as eat a bug. And in all likelihood, that bug was created by factory farming," he writes in a [CNN Op-Ed](#). "If the way we raise animals for food isn't the most important problem in the world right now, it's arguably the No. 1 cause of global warming: The United Nations reports the livestock business generates more greenhouse gas emissions than all forms of transportation combined." I brought awareness to this in my previous post [Meatless Mondays](#).

I count myself among one of the people who, like Foer before he wrote this book, is an on-again off-again vegetarian, trying to make conscientious consumer choices. Though I actually have not eaten as much meat as your average American for years, I do still eat it and don't always buy ethically grown meat. I struggle with the fact that the meat is cheap and I have a family to raise. But when I read statements from a respected nutritionist and doctor such as, "If you truly understood the nightmarish brutality of what happens inside these



windowless animal jails and abattoirs that dot the American ruralscape, you simply would not eat this meat,” which is what Andrew Weil wrote in [The Moral Ferocity of Eating Animals](#) –it makes me think seriously about how to proceed. Foer’s book turned actress [Natalie Portman](#) from a vegetarian to a vegan activist, and as she writes in her *Huffington Post* piece, “Factory farming of animals will be one of the things we look back on as a relic of a less-evolved age.” Have you read this book, or Foer’s *NYT Magazine* piece? What do you think?

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Try a Heritage Turkey this Thanksgiving!

11/20/2009

For Thanksgiving this year, have you considered something other than a traditionally farm-raised turkey? Most families eat the standard “large white” or “broadbreasted white” turkey; 48 million get consumed every Thanksgiving, 99% of which are traditional factory-farmed birds. Those turkeys get raised just to be eaten. That means they can’t even run, fly, or mate - takes pretty much all the fun out of being alive doesn’t it? They are engineered to grow plump quick, and often pumped with antibiotics and hormones. Christine Heinrichs, author of [How to Raise Poultry](#) and publicity director for the Society for the Preservation of Poultry Antiquities, also has a great post about the various labels you might encounter on her blog post, [Thanksgiving turkey](#).



The Thanksgiving flock at Springfield Farms in Maryland includes heritage varieties as well as traditional broadbreasted whites/

Credit Springfield Farms

Huffington Post recently featured several farms that raise [heritage turkeys](#) - a great option if you want to support small farms, organic, local and/or ethically raised animals. Hope this provides some 'food for thought' if you want to explore other options for your Thanksgiving meal! Most of them require you to pick up the turkey from the ranch, so if you don't live in these areas, try searching for heritage turkeys in your region.

Three generations of three families run Maryland's 67-acre [Springfield Farms](#), which sustainably raises four types of turkeys including heritage varieties as well as traditional white turkeys. They're free range during the grass growing season, and do not get fed or injected with anything synthetic like hormones or antibiotics.

In California, the [Slow Food USA Russian River Heritage Turkey Project](#) has turkeys you can order online for pickup near Santa Rosa. Slow Food USA partnered with the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC) in 2001 to encourage local farmers to start raising heritage varieties that were perilously near extinction. The project has had great success. When they began their project, ALBC estimated only 1,200 breeding heritage turkeys of eight varieties lived in the U.S. and by 2004 that number increased to 4,000.

In Tampa, Kansas, the [Good Shepherd Poultry Ranch](#) raises heritage turkeys and their website says, "Birds are grown on outdoor range using vegetarian feed with the highest animal welfare standards." Texas has the Rehoboth Ranch, near Dallas, that grows heritage turkeys that raises turkeys on organically managed pastures "untainted by pesticides, herbicides, or artificial fertilizers," and their animals are never given hormones or steroids, and fed organic grains. Narragansett and Red Bourbon heritage turkeys can be purchased online from Kirschbaum Family Farm through [Local Harvest](#), or you can pick up turkeys from the farm in Kewaskum, Wisconsin.

Huffington Post highlights another company, [Mary's Free Range Turkeys](#) highlighted in a Discovery Channel [How Stuff Works video](#). They take seven months to raise these birds. No doubt the conditions here are far better than those in traditional factory farms, but also different than conditions on small farms where birds that can truly roam to their heart's delight. Small farms can't produce as many turkeys, though, so it's a tradeoff.

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Hydraulic fracturing or "fracking" may kill animals

10/16/2009

Hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking" as it's often called, is a process used to drill for natural gas. Because natural gas occurs in bubbles within tight spaces such as shale bedrock, natural gas companies inject water filled with chemicals far and deep into the rock, fracturing it, which allows them to gather up the natural gas.

After many years of secrecy and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) denial that fracking posed any threat to people, wildlife, and water, in late August the EPA released a report suggesting well water in Wyoming contaminated with methane, lead, copper, and hydrocarbons [could indeed be from hydraulic fracturing](#). Wyoming's not alone. Drilling occurs in 31 states, including [Texas](#), [New Mexico](#), Louisiana, [Pennsylvania](#), and [Colorado](#), and besides the lack of federal regulations, 21 of these have no state regulations.



*A hydraulic fracturing drill rig in Wyoming
Credit [Abrahm Lustgarten/ProPublica](#)*

Reports of dead and tumored cattle, deer, chipmunks, and other wildlife near fracturing sites have surfaced in various locales - not to mention links to human health problems. On September 16th, 8,000 gallons of frack fluid leaked into Stevens Creek near [Dimock](#), Pennsylvania, causing minnows, salamanders and tadpoles to swim erratically and die. Cabot Oil & Gas was responsible for three frac gel spills within a few weeks time, and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is investigating. Yet some environmental groups don't think DEP is doing enough.

Even more tragic, on the border between West Virginia and Pennsylvania, much of the entire 38-miles of [Dunkard Creek](#) ecosystem has [died](#) in a very short time in mid-September - and officials suspect fracking fluid is to blame. The dead and dying include over 10,000 fish, plus salamanders, frogs, crayfish, aquatic insects and freshwater mussels, including two candidates for being listed as endangered species - the salamander mussel and the snuffbox mussel. Biologists observing the site have called it the worst environmental disaster of their lifetime. At first, authorities blamed coal mining waste, but testing found chemicals in the water known to be used by fracking in the nearby Marcellus Shale gas well drilling operations. It's now being treated as a crime scene, since someone may have illegally dumped fracking fluid rather than treating the chemicals.

Outrage against the secrecy over just what chemicals these companies engaged in fracking are pumping into groundwater has started bubbling over. In [Split Estate](#), a documentary airing tomorrow night, October 17th, on [Planet Green](#) about the conflict between surface landowners and the companies extracting oil and gas – including the secretive history of hydraulic fracking – EPA whistleblower Weston Wilson says, “We cannot know what the industry injects in our land. It is exempt from being reported.”

Wilson blew the whistle on the original EPA study, completed during the Bush administration, which claimed fracking caused little or no harm to drinking water because the chemicals are diluted in billions of gallons of water. Oil and gas companies doing hydraulic fracturing have been exempt from complying with the Safe Drinking Water Act since 2005, and also from reporting any chemicals that may end up in surface runoff which is normally covered by the Clean Water Act. As Weston said, natural gas companies need not even disclose what chemicals they use - so citizens have no idea what may seep into their drinking water. While other industries have to list chemicals they used, Dick Cheney got an exemption for fracking. During the early days of Cheney's Vice Presidency, this former Halliburton CEO successfully pressured then-EPA-head Christine Todd Whitman to exempt fracking. In addition, companies can protect the chemical lists used as trade secrets. Suffice it to say fracking fluid contains many of them.

In his report to Congress, Weston wrote, “EPA's conclusions are unsupportable... EPA decisions were supported by a Peer Review Panel; however five of the seven members of this panel appear to have conflicts-of-interest and may benefit from EPA's decision not to conduct further investigation or impose regulatory conditions.”

A new bill - [the FRAC Act](#) - is making its way through Congress (S1215 and HR 2766) to close the 'Halliburton loophole' in the Safe Drinking Water Act, which allows companies to inject chemicals unchecked into groundwater supplies. On top of the chemical contaminants, billions of gallons of water gets pumped into the ground for this process. That's a lot of water when the precious liquid is being fought for, sold, preserved and conserved in drought-weary, water-starved regions in the U.S. I found the "Reporter's Notebook" video by ProPublica's [Abraham Lustgarten](#), which I embedded below, to be very well-done and informative (and I've linked to several of his stories above).

Don't forget to check out [Split Estate](#) on Planet Green!

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Animals key to Canadian eco-friendly winery

10/13/2009

It's the animals that make [Featherstone Estate Winery](#) stand apart. Other wineries may call themselves eco-friendly, but in addition to being pesticide-free since 1999, Featherstone uses several animals to create a holistic approach to viticulture at their 23-acre Ontario, Canada estate: sheep, beneficial insects, and a Harris Hawk.

A tried-and-true strategy in New Zealand - using spring lambs to munch low-growing leaves from grapevines to improve the harvest, without the need of expensive machines - has made its way to North America - specifically to the eco-friendly and 100% pesticide-free Featherstone Estate Winery in Ontario, Canada, co-owned by David Johnson and his wife Louise Engel. *The Environment Report* did an [interesting piece](#) on using lambs as landscapers, and I loved the idea. I always love hearing about we can employ animals in ways that reduce our use of harmful chemicals, like my earlier story "[Flying Mouse-traps](#)" about barn owls and kestrels reducing the need for rodenticide in Israel.



Using sheep to improve the grape harvest is just one innovative use of animals at the eco-friendly Featherstone Winery /Credit Louise Engels

The story goes that, in 2007, Johnson and Engels spent several weeks in New Zealand and became intrigued by their use of sheep in the vineyards. They already had a pesticide-free vineyard, but liked the idea of having sheep tend the grapevines to improve the harvest. Apparently the lambs like the tender young grape leaves that grow at the bottom of the vines, but don't like the unripe tart grapes. The sheep spend around six to eight weeks in the vineyard, but when the grapes start to ripen, that's when they move the sheep out, selling them to restaurants that pair the lamb with their wines. The sheep also help fertilize the plants with their poo. It's a holistic approach that appealed to Johnson and Engel.

They also use a variety of beneficial insects on their winery including lacewings, indigenous ladybugs, and soldier beetles. The ladybugs, also known as ladybird beetles, eat sap-sucking aphids and mites that would otherwise harm their crop.

One of the most fascinating uses of animals on the winery involves [falconry](#). Engel uses a trained Harris hawk to hunt nuisance birds, such as starlings and robins, that otherwise damage their vines and eat the fruit. She became a licensed falconer in 2005 and acquired a Harris Hawk named Amadeus that she uses just at Featherstone Estate. It's not for the faint-hearted or non-committed. "Anyone considering this should be prepared for a substantial, long-term time commitment - on par with owning and training a horse," Engel writes on their website. "In captivity, a Harris' hawk has a life span of 15-20 years."

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The Cove eco-thriller documentary makes a difference for dolphins

10/02/2009

Every September, the seas off of Japan's western shores near the quaint seaside village of Taiji turn red with the blood of dolphins. In a long-time tradition, Japanese fishermen bang on poles to scare dolphins into a small cove. Then they spear them to death. Thousands of bottlenosed, striped, spotted, and Risso's dolphins get killed near Taiji's cove every season, as well as many false killer whales and short-finned pilot whales. The meat gets sold, though a handful of others get captured alive and sold to dolphin trainers and aquariums.



Japanese fishermen lure dolphins into a secluded cove to kill them/ Copyright (c) Oceanic Preservation Society

The Japanese town of Taiji became international news after an eco-thriller documentary named [The Cove](#) was released this summer by [Oceanic Preservation Society](#) (OPS) Productions. Before this, who, outside of a select few, had ever heard of the slaughter of thousands of dolphins in Japan?

The documentary stars [Ric O'Barry](#), a former dolphin trainer who worked with the five dolphins that played Flipper on the popular 1960s TV show. The show became so popular it led to what is now a \$2 billion dolphins and marine mammal entertainment industry. O'Barry's view on captive dolphins changed after one of the Flipper dolphins "committed suicide" in his arms by closing her blowhole in order to drown. Soon after that, he went to Bimini and let a captive dolphin go, leading to his first arrest. O'Barry now actively campaigns against any use of dolphins in captivity. When he became aware of the dolphin slaughter in Taiji, he felt he had to do something. Some of his original footage caught the attention of former National Geographic photographer and co-founder of OPS, Louie Psihoyos, who directed the documentary.

The film captures stunning – and secretly filmed – shots of the dolphin slaughter, as well as beautiful shots of them in their oceanic environment. Prevented from filming legally by Japanese authorities, the crew – which included freedivers, electronics experts, and even pirates – snuck into the cove which is protected by steep cliffs on three sides. They donned night vision goggles, employed military grade thermal cameras, hid in camouflaged blinds, and used fake rocks to hide microphones – evading fishermen and authorities all the while. The high drama of the film is part of its appeal, not to mention its beautiful cinematography.

After being screened at several film festivals, the documentary has gotten much media play and won several film festival awards. Beyond that, it has begun making a difference for the dolphins. On September 1st, the

world watched and waited to see whether the dolphin slaughter would begin. For the first time ever, fishermen did not begin their annual dolphin slaughter on the first day of the season. A few days later, though, fishermen lured around 100 dolphins and pilot whales into the Cove. But in a surprising move, perhaps because of the international attention, the fishermen opted only to capture the dolphins for the aquarium trade but not to kill any dolphins – though they did kill pilot whales. They even set around 70 of those dolphins free.

O'Barry disagrees with any capture of the dolphins and says they're kept in tanks far too small for animals used to swimming up to 40 miles per day on the open ocean. The fishermen get up to \$150,000 for each live dolphin sold but only \$600 for dead dolphins sold as meat. I am not sure why they don't catch more for aquaria but I suspect it has to do with demand since only so many aquaria exist around the world.

In more positive news, the [Tokyo International Film Festival](#), which opens October 17th, decided to screen *The Cove* in such a last minute decision that the movie information didn't even make it into the main brochure. And it was just announced the film will be dubbed in Japanese for the festival rather than subtitled.

Most Japanese are completely unaware of the dolphin slaughter. They also may not even be aware they're eating dolphin meat since it's sometimes sold as other things, such as "whale meat." Dolphin meat has dangerously high levels of mercury, more toxic than even Japanese health standards allow, according to whale biologist and DNA expert [Scott Baker](#), a professor at Oregon State University who consulted on the film. Japanese schools used to serve dolphin meat as part of the lunch program, but that stopped this year, in part due to the work of OPS experts. "Our contribution was to identify the true species source of the dolphin meat which is otherwise incompletely and sometimes erroneously labeled," says Baker. "I think the molecular monitoring of the whalemeat markets has helped to raise international awareness of the diversity of species taken in this hunt and the extent of the mercury contamination - not just in Taiji."

I have been intrigued by the story of *The Cove* for a while now, and find it very exciting when eye-opening media edutainment presented to the broader public makes such an immediate difference to the subject - in this case, Japan's dolphins. The big question will be whether it will create lasting change, or whether the dolphins will get only a temporary reprieve while international attention stays focused on them.

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Meatless Mondays

09/21/2009

Here are some fast facts you may not know about meat consumption. United Nation's [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO) estimates that 18% of greenhouse gas emissions come from meat production. A large proportion of that comes from destruction of Amazon rainforest as they clear for cattle grazing (and soybean production). Some comes from the methane produced by cows (yes, guys, that means cow farts and burps), which is 23 times more potent as a greenhouse gas than CO2 which we hear more about. And livestock consumes five times as much grain as people do, which takes up space and emits its own share of greenhouse gases. Eating beef or pork also contributes more greenhouse gases than eating chicken.



Founder of [The Red White and Green](#) Jennifer Grayson visits a farmer's market, one way she supports Meatless Monday/
Copyright (c) 2009 Jennifer Grayson

Now there's something simple you can do to help curb global warming - don't eat meat on Monday!

"The Meatless Monday Campaign first started as a way to reduce saturated fat intake by 15%, in accordance with the [Healthy People 2010](#) recommendations," explains Ralph Loglisci, Project Director for the Johns Hopkins [Bloomberg School of Public Health](#) Healthy Monday Project, which includes [Meatless Monday](#). "The Meatless Monday campaign also recognizes that food animal production, particularly industrially produced food animals, is resource intensive. The amount of fossil fuel, water, feed, and antibiotics used to raise industrially produced animals is significant. Anyone who reduces his or her meat intake one day a week and replaces it with a healthy vegetarian alternative will do a lot more than simply reduce their carbon foot print."

Americans eat, on average, twice as much protein as the rest of the world, which also happens to be more than the USDA recommends. America grows and kills 10 billion animals every year. By reducing meat portions we can save money, improve health, and help the environment! Mark Bittman did a great piece on the [meat machine](#) for the *New York Times* ... he even coined a term – less-meatarianism.

According to Loglisci, "there is more than enough evidence that shows reducing meat consumption nationwide would lead to dramatic improvements in environmental degradation, widespread public and personal health risks, animal welfare and environmental and social justice issues." He wrote a very informative [Center for a Livable Future](#) blog post, [How Much Does U.S. Livestock Contribute to Greenhouse Gas Emissions](#), about the scientific research on how agriculture and meat production contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, debunking some claims floating around that are not so accurate.

[Michael Pollan](#), national best-selling author of *The Omnivores Dilemma* and *The Botany of Desire* said on the Oprah show, "Even one meatless day a week — a meatless Monday, which is what we do in my household — if everybody in America did that, that would be the equivalent of taking 20 million mid-size sedans off the road."

Across the pond, Sir Paul McCartney started a similar movement called [Meat Free Mondays](#). On their website McCartney sings a song urging you to give up meat just one day each week to help curb carbon emissions and slow global warming. Plenty of people are joining the movement, including Sheryl Crow, Sir Richard

Branson, Woody Harrelson, Yoko Ono, Chris Martin, Moby, and [many others](#).

Ever since I learned about [the chicks being ground alive](#) at egg farms, I have become even more keenly aware of the role my food choices has on the environment, and how little I am aware of what goes on in my food's production. Though I already try to eat low on the food chain and try to eat organic, I'm not an exclusive vegetarian. Now, I am now going to take this opportunity to definitively join onto Meatless Monday as a way to help out the planet a little more. Lucky for me, and you if you join me, there are many recipes out there by others who have gone this route, including [Nutrition Expert Mitzi Dulan](#), and [Jennifer Grayson](#), Founding Editor of The [Red White and Green](#) and Huffington Post's Eco-Etiquette blogger.

And for those people who are already vegans and vegetarians but still want to help, here's another option - [Heat Free Mondays](#). No you don't have to go without a heater, but the idea is to not cook to contribute even more to saving greenhouse gases!

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Feminized male fish abundant in American rivers

09/17/2009

Why in the world are male fish in American rivers growing female organs? Emily Sohn reports for Discovery News, that "[Intersex Fish Numbers Swell in U.S. Rivers](#)." Biologists with the U.S. Geological Survey just completed a study of bass in American river basins, and found many male fish have both male and female sex organs. Some species were more affected than others, and some river basins had higher levels than others, with some rivers having 70% feminization. Wow! North and South Carolina had the highest levels, followed by the Mississippi River in Minnesota and the Yampa River in Colorado. They weren't able to link these high rates of feminization back to any particular contaminant, though.

Even though at an average site, the number of feminized male fish was low, 44% of sites had at least one feminized male. This feminization is linked to endocrine-disrupting hormones, such as those in birth control pills. The hormones end up in rivers because after we flush, the water ultimately ends up in our river basins after treatment. The



data came over a ten year period from 1994 through 2004, when the government stopped funding the project.

In this study, black bass - including largemouth and smallmouth which are popular sportfish - seem to be most vulnerable to feminization. The question it brings to my mind is, how many other organisms besides fish are being affected by the water that these fish swim in? The *New York Times* recently tackled the question of why our waterways still fail to meet the objectives lawmakers set forth in 1972, when the Clean Water Act was signed into law. Their groundbreaking series, [Toxic Waters](#), covers this issue. They created a [database of water pollutants](#) that is more comprehensive than the EPAs. It's something every American should read!



A stringer of bass caught at the Blanco River in Texas' Hill Country
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Egg industry grinds millions of baby chicks alive

09/07/2009





*A "sexer" working at Hy-Line in Iowa separates out male from female chicks, tossing males down the chute to be macerated or ground up alive/
Copyright (c) 2009 Mercy for Animals*

Sometimes you see something that makes your jaw drop and stuns you into silence, which is quickly followed by outrage. When I watched this Youtube video, I had that experience. Everyone who eats eggs should know about this and watch [this video](#) (also below). It's not bloody or gory, but shows a bunch of very adorable fuzzy chicks dropping into a machine that the narrator explains grinds them up alive. Warning: It is probably hard for most people to watch this and not cringe.

Here's the scoop. Someone from the Chicago-based nonprofit [Mercy for Animals](#) went undercover to work for [Hy-Line's](#) Iowa egg factory for two weeks and secretly recorded video. The most ghoulish scene involves baby chicks moving down a conveyor belt, where workers separate out the males and toss them into a chute where they are ground up alive in a meat grinder or macerator. The video itself only shows one meaty chick at the opposite end of the grinder, but the narrator says he saw bloody pulp coming from it. The industry euphemistically calls it "instantaneous euthanasia" and get this - this is not unusual. It's apparently legal and widely used in the egg production industry. Even with cage-free eggs.

Apparently, this happens to an estimated 200 million male chicks per year, industry-wide, with Hy-Line alone producing 33.4 million chicks per year according to their website. After the Associated Press got hold of the video, Hy-Line confirmed that "instantaneous euthanasia" of male chicks is industry standard, and said it's "supported by the animal veterinary and scientific community" including the [American Veterinary Medical Association](#) (their guidelines on euthanasia [here](#)).

Hy-Line confirmed the video shows violations of its own animal rights policy, though the grinding is legal and they say, the most "instantaneous" way of killing the chicks. (Certainly it is not the most humane). The ground-up baby chicks apparently go into dog food or fertilizer. The male chicks serve no purpose to egg companies - alive - because they don't lay eggs, and don't grow fast enough to be sold for meat.

I'm confounded at how the public could not have known about this. Mercy for Animals' Executive Director, Nathan Runkle, questioned in a news conference in Des Moines: would it be acceptable if it were puppies or kitties?

On Mercy for Animals website they list [statements from four experts](#) about the practice. Dr. Karen Davis, the founder and president of [United Poultry Concerns](#), says, "Given that the nervous system of a chicken originates during the 21st hour of incubation, and that a chick has a fully developed nervous system at the time of hatching, it is reasonable to conclude, as a fact of neurophysiology, that the chicks are suffering extreme pain as they are being cut up by macerator blades."

Female chicks don't escape pain and suffering. They go to the debeaking machine, which burns off the beak with a laser to prevent hens from pecking one another. In a normal life, the chicks would be sheltered and comforted by their mother's wings for the first part of their life. The video shows the chicks hanging by their beak from the machine as they squirm and flail about.

It certainly makes a person think twice about eggs. I pay \$1 or more per carton extra for cage-free eggs but according to the San Francisco Chronicle's Tails of the City blog, the [Humane Society of the United States](#) said even companies selling cage-free eggs engage in "instantaneous euthanasia." In grocery stores, only eggs "[certified Humane](#)" come from companies that don't kill baby chicks or debeak, though they can still [trim beaks](#) to prevent cannibalism. One can also find local individuals who raise and sell eggs, though the practice is unregulated. Mercy for Animals promotes veganism.

After all this egg talk, curiosity got the better of me and I researched cage-free egg production conditions overall. Turn out, a journalist from the [Arizona Republic](#) compared a regular egg farm to one that sells cage-free eggs, and found the cage-free conditions worse. The chickens ran around in their own feces, and the chickens pecked one another and had lost feathers around their neck as they fought to establish pecking order. This was just two specific farms, but I may have to research and write more about this in the future.

Mercy for Animals sent letters to 50 of the nation's largest grocery chains asking them to put the following label on eggs: "Warning: Male chicks are ground-up alive by the egg industry." Somehow I don't think that will happen voluntarily, but regardless, it seems to me that all consumers should know about this standard industry practice.

We got dolphin-safe tuna several years back because of public pressure and boycotts, and I believe that if people care about this, they can also demand the industry engage in humane egg production.

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Good year for endangered Coho salmon

09/03/2009

While on a recent trip to the Pacific Northwest coast – the lush, green part of the country that nurtured my love of nature as a child – I visited a couple of places where salmon spawn. After spending most of their lives in the ocean, they return to the same creeks and rivers where they were born to mate and lay eggs right around this time of year. Some, such as Coho salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*), die after spawning.

With a couple writer friends, I hiked through a part of the Salmon-Huckleberry Wilderness on Mount Hood in northern Oregon, a still pristine temperate rainforest where Native Americans once gathered huckleberries and fished for salmon. It's part of the BLM's [Wildwood Recreation Site](#). The federally designated [Wild and Scenic Salmon River](#), runs through this region, full of spawning Coho and Chinook salmon. It's part of the Cascade Streamwatch program where school students collect data and learn about stream ecology. The Salmon River runs into the Sandy River a couple miles downstream of the hiking spot, which empties into the Columbia River then out into the ocean. [Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife](#) (ODFW) conducts salmon surveys along tributaries of the Columbia River as part of a long-term monitoring project, explains ODFW biologist Kara Anlauf. During my recent trip, I also visited [Cannon Beach](#) on the Oregon Coast, another hotspot for salmon research.



*Coho salmon/
Credit National Marine Fisheries Service NMFS/NOAA*

Talking about salmon species is complicated by the fact that biologists divvy up each species into several “evolutionary significant units” or ESUs that functionally behave as separate species. Because salmon return to the drainages where they were born, there’s little chance for interbreeding between ESUs, and scientists must manage their conservation separately. Each ESU is treated as separate species under the Endangered Species Act. “They often have distinctive life history traits and are genetically distinct,” explains NOAA fisheries biologist Laurie Weitkamp.

Of seven Coho ESUs on the West coast, five are in trouble. Only one is faring well – the Olympic peninsula ESU in Washington and another in southwest Washington is data deficient. The Central California coast population is endangered and the Lower Columbia River, Oregon Coast, and southern Oregon/northern California ESUs are threatened under the Endangered Species Act, while the Puget Sound population in Washington is a “species of concern.” But in Alaska, coho - also known there as silver salmon - are going gangbusters!

The West Coast salmon management saga is fitting of an old Western movie with all its twists and turns. Building hydroelectric dams has permanently altered the way salmon spawn in some rivers, and the idea of ripping out dams to allow salmon to return to old haunts has been hotly debated. In addition to stream alteration, habitat destruction, logging and climate change have led to the decline of most West Coast salmon. Lawsuits and flared tempers have resulted from many stakeholders– Native Americans, loggers, government agencies, scientists, and the like.

Some 23 million coho smolts get released into the Columbia River every year from hatchery production but

the fish can't sustain their own population without help at this point in time. "Roughly 70-90% of the salmon production in the Columbia River is hatchery fish. The remaining 10-30% is natural production," explains Weitkamp. Despite overall species decline, loads of coho are spawning this year - largely due to Mother Nature rather than human assistance. "We had exceptionally good ocean conditions in 2008--cold water, lots to eat, few predators and competitors -- so we think the marine survival was exceptionally high," Weitkamp says. "Good ocean conditions largely result from Mother Nature, although we certainly contribute to bad ocean conditions with climate change, overfishing, pollution, etc."

The governors of Washington, Oregon, and California [wrote a letter](#) urging the Obama admin to do a full-on top-to-bottom review of salmon management in the Pacific Northwest. It will be interesting to watch this unfold under the new administration. U.S. Judge Redden had rejected Bush's salmon management plan as "business as usual," and gave the Obama administration until September 15th to review biological opinions on 13 runs of salmon and steelhead trout.

You can also [write NOAA Administrator Dr. Jane Lubchenco](#) about federal salmon policy through the National Wildlife Federation website.

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