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## Almost meatless

### How one woman decided to change what she ate

By Wendee Holtcamp  
June 20, 2011

I'm standing outside my hippie dad's Oregon log cabin, seven years old, hand on jutting hip. I'd been playing in the garden, sniffing Dad's prize roses, daydreaming. Now it was harvest time.

Dad carried an axe in one hand and an Araucana rooster in another, a sock over its head to calm it. He placed the squawking bird down on a stump and, with one smack, struck off its head. The headless chicken flopped around, blood sputtering. I watched, enthralled and revolted in equal measure.

I decided not to eat our chickens. "It's so much healthier than store-bought chicken," my dad pleaded with me. "These birds had good lives, and we know what they ate." Still I refused. Sure, I wanted meat — but only from a package.



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## change what she ate

By Wendee Holtcamp

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Fast-forward 30 years. I had been an on-again, off-again vegetarian since my teen years, but mostly I just ate lower on the food chain, aware that **producing meat** required more **land, water, and energy**, and created more **pollution** than grain or veggies alone

But it took a **viral video** last year of fuzzy little chicks getting ground alive — **standard industry practice** for some 200 million male chicks annually — to shock me into action. I hit the research stacks, reading books

such as *101 Reasons Why I'm a Vegetarian* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, as well as scientific studies, NGO reports, and government stats.

Saturday-morning cartoons often show happy pigs wallowing in mud, chickens pecking the ground, and cows grazing on grass. And for the past 10,000 years or so, this was an accurate picture of animal husbandry, a practice that was largely sustainable. Today, however, some 40 percent of the world's food animals — and the vast majority of America's nine billion food animals — are raised under conditions where chick-grinding is, well, run of the mill.



A chicken on the ground.



"Animals have been taken off the landscape and put in buildings," explains **Nicolette Hahn Niman**, the author of *Righteous Porkchop* and a former litigator for the Waterkeeper Alliance on a **case**

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*Asparagus for dinner.*

landscape no longer occur. They're taking away a source of fertility to the land, and creating a waste problem."

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. livestock produce some **500 million tons** of manure each year. Once, that manure would have gone back into the land as fertilizer. On factory farms — also known as confined animal feeding operations, or CAFOs — the animal waste is a pollution problem.

**Pig CAFOs**, for example, include huge holding tanks (which can overflow or rupture) of **liquefied excrement**. Some **farms** inject this raw sewage into the ground, or spray it on agricultural fields. Workers who have fallen into manure lagoons quickly **die from hydrogen-sulfide** poisoning; aquatic organisms die in the rivers the manure has entered via water tables and spraying.

So I ratcheted up my vegetarianism by going meatless on Mondays. The **Meatless Monday** movement was launched in 2003 by the Johns Hopkins **Bloomberg School of Public Health** to raise awareness of how meat consumption contributes to heart disease, obesity, and cancer, but the school soon linked the campaign with helping the environment.

against Smithfield, the nation's largest pork producer. "Automated machinery provides feed and water, which is often laced with slaughterhouse wastes and antibiotics. Most breeding sows and egg-laying hens are kept in cramped metal cages. Any beneficial impacts that animals have on the

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A widely cited 2006 report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations titled "[Livestock's Long Shadow](#)" found that food animals contribute 18 percent of greenhouse gases worldwide. Much of that value comes from rainforest deforestation, and most of the rest comes from the aforementioned liquefied-sewage problem.



In the U.S., the EPA estimates that six percent of our greenhouse gases come from agriculture, but we also have a disproportionate number of vehicles and smokestacks.

"What we eat in the U.S. has global impacts, whether or not we directly consume beef from Brazil," says David Tilman, a University of Minnesota ecology professor. "We use about half of our farmland to grow grains for animal feed. Were we to eat less meat or eat more environmentally efficient meat, we would export more grains, and this would decrease the demand for crops that are an underlying driver of tropical deforestation."



*Broccoli and soba noodles are good enough to eat every Monday.*

Before long, my Meatless Mondays expanded into a broader commitment to sustainable eating. I read Jonathan Safran Foer's powerful [Eating Animals](#), and felt profoundly ashamed. How could I rescue a turtle on the road or shun bunny-tested shampoo but not think twice about eating pork from an industry that keeps pigs in air so noxious, they die when the ventilators fail?

The [U.S. Animal Welfare Act](#) does not cover farm animals, and 30 state laws [exempt](#)

anything defined as “industry standard.” Even if I didn’t care about the environment, the animal cruelty involved in chick grinding would’ve stirred me to change my lifestyle.

These days, my diet is nearly all vegetarian, all the time. The only meat I’ll eat is either wild game, or meat that doesn’t come from factory-farmed animals — and since sustainable, humanely raised and slaughtered meat is appropriately expensive, it doesn’t enter my house often.

While scientists and policymakers argue over the best solutions to ag-induced climate change, pollution, and animal-welfare issues, I opted for a simple but effective consumer choice. As Niman likes to say: eat less meat, eat better meat.

*Houston-based freelance writer **Wendee Holtcamp** has a passion for food and sustainability. She has been writing since 1995 for magazines including Scientific American, Audubon, Miller-McCune, National Wildlife, and other magazines. A version of this article originally appeared in **The Daily Climate**.*

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## comment

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**1. by anonymous on Jun 21, 2011 at 9:45 AM PDT**

Why not just purchase pastured animals? It's the process, not the fact that you are eating animals that's wrong. Eating animal products is very healthy, provided they are sourced properly. You're also deluding yourself that factory farming based agriculture (eg. wheat from your soba noodless) is sustainable in the first place. There are huge inputs in terms of fossil fuel, required to sustain modern agriculture.



**2. by joanmenefee on Jun 21, 2011 at 2:02 PM PDT**

*\_Eating Animals\_* made a big impact on me as well. Though I am still eating venison, wild caught local fish and locally raised bison and chicken, I continue to tip the balance toward vegetarianism (I have to admit I am too mentally lazy to touch veganism, so far...). I have had the discussion about the morality of eating non-human animals with myself so many times, I have to chuckle every time I wonder about it. Yes, we have canines; yes, we need protein; those facts suggest meat eating is defensible. Nonetheless, the energy and imagination devoted to creating healthy vegetarian meals is admirable. And people who actually think about where their food comes from are vital to the more sustainable world so many of us pine for. So I support you fully in your work (because it is work) and when I hear people defending some form of the status quo, I can't help but feel they are reacting to feeling threatened or judged by vegetarians. I know that I have felt that way in the past. Good luck in your quest.



**3. by Sandy on Jun 22, 2011 at 9:05 AM PDT**

Several years ago I, too, came to the conclusion that I couldn't support the inhumane practices of factory farming and moved to vegetarianism...until my son suggested I find people locally raising animals humanely and support their efforts financially so they could grow and prosper. It took a while, but I found grass-fed, pastured beef first. As I looked for local and pastured pigs, I bought pork from a larger humane operation in Wisconsin. I finally found a local, biodynamic farm locally that has pork and chickens and eggs. It had been about 4 years w/o chickens and they only come whole so I have to return to breaking down my own birds which, along with paying about \$15 apiece, means I won't have to whine about it very often. I've found that I still eat a lot of veggies (also belong to a local CSA) and different grains while enjoying w/o guilt the meat that I do eat.



**4. by lovelyleslie on Jun 23, 2011 at 10:45 AM PDT**

Folks, good for all of you for being conscious consumers. First of all though, the author needs to be reading about carbon neutral farming, ala Joel Salatin and then decide what to eat. I was a vegetarian for 25 years and was very sick as a result; it is certainly NOT even close to be the answer for most

people. I also have met dozens of people that are now recovering from being vegan, raw foodists, etc. The point is this; we are all trying to figure out how to eat, what works, how to be more sustainable. At no point in history are we more conscious AND confused about what to eat. Our dietary choices are loaded with many different 'isms' and certainly we all can agree on one thing; we are so incredibly BLESSED to be living right now, with all the choices we have. All the issues aside, because there are too many to list, let us all be GRATEFUL and eat in a manner of deep reverence for the people that are producing the amazing diversity and bounty that we have on our plates. For that my friends, is reason alone to be grateful and happy.



**5. by anonymous on Jul 5, 2011 at 9:11 PM PDT**

Like lovelyleslie mentions, vegetarianism and veganism are profoundly UNhealthy lifestyles for most people (unless your ethnicity has always had a vegetarian diet, as one of my friend's does). You don't need to eat a lot of meat, not even once a week if you don't feel like it. I only eat meat once or twice a month myself, unless I make a meat sauce for pasta that I freeze and/or rehydrate to use over the next little while, or I roast a chicken. Chicken's actually one of the best ways to eat meat while still being frugal, e.g.: roast it, make gravy, and eat part of the breast for one meal; save the rest of the meat for other meals, then make stock for soups with the bones and meat you won't eat by itself; and make sure you save the gravy for other meals as well. No, it won't go as far for a family of four, but even a large chicken while staying with my family feeds us quite well.

Why eat no meat when it's only industrial farming that you're opposed to? Why not support a sustainable farm and buy a chicken - which you can get a LOT of meals out of if you store it properly? Sustainable and cost effective. (I know you, the author, touched on it, but it's really good to ask yourself if you're truly supporting your cause).



**6. by anonymous on Aug 7, 2011 at 6:44 PM PDT**

I am a lifelong vegetarian and healthy as a horse, but a good friend after a lifetime of meat eating (we are both in our 60s) switched to vegetarianism to please her husband and now is having serious problems - I think from her diet. Yes you can do well as a veg but if it is a misery for you, why bother? Food is one of the greatest pleasures in life. Eat what your idea of good food is (I do!) and don't apologize.

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