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Simon Fairlie: How Eating Meat Can Save the Planet

By TARA KELLY Tuesday, Oct. 12, 2010

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The Perfect Steak



In a new book, British farmer and former editor Simon Fairlie says eating meat in moderation may be good for the environment
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Countless studies claim that eating meat harms the planet and contributes to global warming. The U.N.'s 2006 Food and Agriculture Organization report states that meat produces 18% of the world's carbon emissions — more than the global transport infrastructure. But in his new book, *Meat: A Benign Extravagance*, Simon Fairlie, a British farmer and former editor of the *Ecologist* magazine, tears apart the theory that being carnivorous is bad for the planet — and says that eating moderate amounts of meat could be greener than going vegan. **(See the top 10 animal stories of 2009.)**

You argue that, rather than being bad for the planet, livestock is beneficial to the environment. Why?

Every agricultural system produces a surplus of waste and hard-to-use biomass that is best kept in the food chain by feeding it to livestock. Meat or dairy produced this way has little extra environmental impact. Animals kept on small farms also produce benefits, such as fending off predators and pests and fertilizing soil.

Why do vegans and the green movement argue that meat is so bad for the environment?

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Many vegans and vegetarians rely on one source from the U.N. calculation that livestock generates 18% of global carbon emissions, but this figure contains basic mistakes. It attributes all deforestation from ranching to cattle, rather than logging or development. It also muddles up one-off emissions from deforestation with ongoing pollution.

How do you respond to critics and scientists who argue meat production is inefficient?

Scientists have calculated that globally the ratio between the amounts of useful plant food used to produce meat is about 5 to 1. If you feed animals only food that humans can eat — which is, indeed, largely the case in the Western world — that may be true. But animals also eat food we can't eat, such as grass. So the real conversion figure is 1.4 to 1.

(See a special report on the science of appetite.)

So can we tuck into a steak guilt-free?

That's a tabloid way of looking at it. If somebody had doubts about [whether or not to eat meat] and they read my book and agreed with it, they might think you can afford to eat a modest amount of dairy and meat without destructing the environment. But, of course, it is not what we eat individually — it is what we eat as a whole society that has the impact on the environment. Some vegans may continue their vegan ways. I'm arguing for meat in moderation, not to eradicate meat entirely, nor to overconsume it.

What are the most sustainable types of meat to eat?

Pigs fed off food waste, whey and other forms of garden and agricultural waste. Dairy cows that are eating grass and clover as part of mixed-arable rotation. They have very little toll on the environment and are, on balance, benign. The way forward is to switch to organic farming. We would have to cut meat consumption by half, but our dairy intake would remain about the same.

(See pictures of the perfect steak.)

You describe yourself as a born-again carnivore. How did that happen?

I was a vegetarian from 18 to 24 years old, and I gave up meat partly because I had misgivings about the cruelty to animals. But I began eating meat again when I moved to the [English] countryside and started keeping goats. I had to do something with the male goats. They wouldn't produce milk or offspring, so I started eating them. At 59, I now eat meat twice a week. I still to this day have some misgivings about killing animals for food. But intellectually, I know it is the right thing to do.

See pictures of what makes you eat more food.

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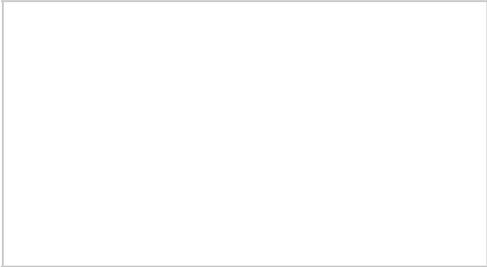
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MARIO SEPULVEDA, One of the trapped Chilean miners, on what kept him alive for 69 days underground. Upon rescue, he handed out rocks as gifts to family members and rescuers.

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