

Five reasons why Americans must stop eating animals

by Kathy Stevens

Around the country, animal advocates are giddy. Three food empires: Smithfield Foods, the world's largest pork producer, Wolfgang Puck, the world-famous chef/restaurateur/food-products creator, and Burger King, the world's second-largest hamburger chain, have vowed to alter their practices to reflect more humane standards of care for animals used for food. The veil is being lifted. Agribusiness has a hideous face. Smithfield's decision to phase out the "gestation crate" is certainly a step towards more responsible stewardship over animals used for food. The crate, a tiny steel box in which mother pigs are confined for most of their lives, is considered one of the cruelest practices of agribusiness. Likewise, Puck's decision to use only humanely-raised meat and to take foie gras off his menus is a ground-breaking precedent: for the first time, a high-profile restaurateur is acknowledging that commercially-raised meat comes from tortured and poisoned animals. Even Burger King has opted to replace a small percentage of its commercially grown meat and eggs with more humanely grown products. Collectively, these decisions suggest that we are, indeed, at a tipping point. America does not like agribusiness, and business, wanting to save its bottom line, is taking note. Ordinary people are driving profound change. We can do far more to turn the tide, America, against an industry that treats food animals as units of production in factories that "grow" over 10 billion animals a year for us to eat. We can reject factory farming's barbaric practices by refusing to purchase commercially-grown animal products. If we're really serious, we can stop purchasing animal products altogether. Until we change what we purchase, agribusiness will continue to torture animals, harm the humans who eat them, and wreak environmental havoc. If you need some incentive, here it is: 1. The animals we eat are tortured from birth to death. The small farm that once raised cows, pigs, and chickens humanely has virtually disappeared from the American landscape. Today, nearly all food animals are grown in warehouses or feedlots that cram tens of thousands of animals into spaces so tight that they can barely turn around. They live in their own excrement, and the ammonia from their urine damages their throats, lungs, and eyes. Pigs' tails and chickens' beaks are removed without anesthesia. Male chicks, unwanted "by-products" of the egg industry, are suffocated, crushed, or gassed to death. And if you're about to comfort yourself that at least their deaths are quick and humane, don't! Yes, Congress passed a Humane Slaughter Act fifty years ago that required animals to be "stunned" before being killed. (It exempted birds from the Act, so chickens, turkeys, and other meat birds are denied even that slight concession.) However, driven by profit, slaughterhouses move animals at breakneck speed through a mechanized process. The result? Every day, countless cows and pigs and most meat birds have their throats slit or are boiled alive while fully conscious. Let's call slaughterhouses what they are: chambers of horror for animals who experience pain and fear no differently than you or I. 2. Raising animals for human food is killing the planet. Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* brought conversations about global warming into the mainstream. The climate is warming so quickly that, unless we alter our lifestyles, weather patterns will be wildly unpredictable, natural disasters will be a common occurrence, and many coastal areas will soon be underwater. Mystifyingly, Gore (presumably a meat eater) omitted any discussion of a primary culprit in the warming of the Earth: meat production. Agribusiness taxes and pollutes our water supply, contributes more of the greenhouse gases that are rapidly warming our planet than all transportation combined, and is destroying the planet's biodiversity. It is either the primary or a primary contributor to air and water pollution, soil erosion, rainforest destruction, land contamination, and the extinction of many species of animals. So if you'd like to lessen your footprint, the single most helpful step you can take is to eliminate animal products from your diet. 3. You'll be much healthier. Do you really want to eat growth hormones, antibiotics, steroids, and pesticides? You're eating them in abundance when you eat commercially raised meat. Vegetarians are about forty percent less likely to develop cancer than meat eaters, and about ninety percent less likely to have a heart attack. Strokes, many degenerative diseases, and diabetes are all markedly lower in vegetarians than in meat eaters. Vegetarians not only have lower cholesterol and blood pressure, but not surprisingly, we're slimmer on average than our carnivorous pals. 4. In ways that matter, animals are a lot like we are. We all know that our dogs and cats have rich emotional lives and fascinating personalities. Why on earth would other animals be any different? I run a sanctuary for abused and discarded horses and farm animals, and I've had some exceptional four-legged teachers. Every single animal at Catskill Animal

Sanctuary is multi-dimensional, and many have fascinating quirks or traits. Franklin the pig's impish sense of humor entertains us all day, and we all admire Rambo the sheep's courage and candor. I would not have believed that a formerly abused ram would reject the company of other sheep in order to watch over our farm and its inhabitants, or that as he was dying, a gentle old steer named Samson would lick my face over and over until he took his last breath. And who would guess that a rooster would beg to go for car rides and demand his share of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich every day? This stuff happens all the time, and it begs the question: If this is who they are, do I really want to eat them? It feels good to align your eating habits with your values. In *The Way We Eat, Why Our Food Choices Matter*, Jim Mason and Peter Singer argue that "good people" make "bad food choices" because they lack access to information that would encourage them to choose differently. A quick web search will yield volumes of information to help you grasp that indeed, we are participating in torture when we eat meat, that indeed, we are destroying the planet by raising 65 billion animals worldwide each year for people to consume. This is a dark time in our history, and I, for one, sense that Americans are hungry for kindness. If you consider yourself a kind and compassionate person, take the life-affirming step of replacing meat with vegetables and grains. Act in accordance with your values. Doing so feels really good. It is consumers, after all, who drive the market. Agribusiness will change "rapidly" when our buying habits change. You are more powerful than you think. Purchase with consciousness and compassion, and the whole world will thank you. Go to Burger King if you must...but buy a salad. Chances are that you're far hungrier for kindness than you are for that burger.

Five reasons why Americans must stop eating animals by Kathy Stevens