

ECONEWS

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Promoting the Vision of a Sustainable Vancouver Island

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MEAT-FREE THURSDAYS

In Belgium, the small city of Ghent, with its cyclists, winding canals and towering spires, has declared every Thursday a day free of meat, fish, and shellfish – “Donderdag – Veggie Dag”, as they say in Flemish, making it the first community in the world to do so.

Each Thursday, every restaurant and canteen will offer at least one vegetarian dish, and some will go fully vegetarian. Starting in September, the city's schools will make a meat-free meal the default option on Thursdays, unless parents insist on their children having meat, and at least one hospital wants to join in.

And while many of Ghent's burghers will doubtless still enjoy their burgers, the city is encouraging people to embrace the change by distributing 90,000 maps listing the best places to eat a meat-free diet, along with recipe booklets and food samples.

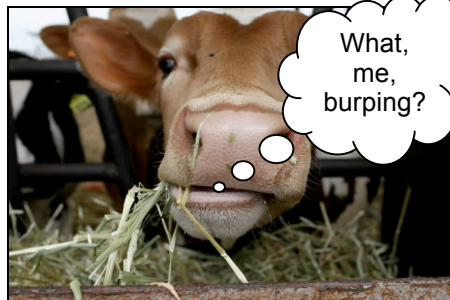
In America, The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore is spearheading a "meatless Mondays" campaign with 28 other public health schools, running outreach programs to promote a meat-free start to the week. In England, Paul McCartney, Yoko Ono, Richard Branson, Bryan Adams, Sheryl Crow, and other celebrities have just launched a campaign for Meat-Free Mondays.

Might this be the beginning of a critical mass in public awareness about how harmful the meat industry is to the global environment? We are all familiar with how we should be walking, cycling and taking the bus instead of driving, and rightly so, since transport produces 14% of the world's greenhouse gases.

The world's livestock industry, however, produces 18% of the emissions – more than all the world's transport. It does so because of the constant burping of methane by cows, the nitrous oxide emissions from fertilizers and manure, the natural gas that is needed to make the fertilizers, and the destruction of tropical

rainforests to raise cattle and grow soybeans to feed them.

If the animals are raised locally, organically, and are grass-fed on pasture instead of being fed grain in an intensive feedlot, the impact is significantly less – and the health disadvantages fewer – so there is a way out for meat-lovers.



In addition to its climate impact, raising meat – and beef in particular – uses vast quantities of water. David Pimentel of Cornell University has calculated that each kilogram of beef requires an incredible 100,000 litres, or 714 bathtubs full of water. Ponder that, the next time you save water while showering or brushing your teeth.

And yet at most environmental gatherings, if there's meat on the menu, most people still chow down on it.

You might have thought that the horrible cruelty of factory farming would persuade people to stop eating meat – but not so. In the US, meat consumption has risen from 63 kg per person a year in the 1950s to 126 kg per person today. In Canada it's 97 kg per person, per year – requiring 69,000 bathtubs full of water to raise it.

There are also the health arguments. William Castelli, MD, Medical Director at the Framingham Cardiovascular Institute, says that a low fat plant-based diet would lower the heart-attack rate by some 85%, and the cancer rate by 60%.

The China Study, which found 8,000 links between diet and disease, found that those who ate the most plant-based food were the healthiest, while those

who ate the most animal-based food got the most chronic diseases. The greatest benefits came to those who ate the greatest variety of plant food, with the least heating, salting and processing.

Eating meat is also associated with obesity, probably because it increases insulin levels, which may cause a hormonal response that increases body growth – meat-eaters have three times the obesity rate of vegetarians, and nine times that of vegans. It is very rare to see a vegetarian with a pot belly.

Turning the data about the benefits of vegetarian and vegan food into public policy has always been a challenge, however – until Ghent showed the way forward. Which city will be the first in North America to follow?

The larger food agenda is slowly making its way into policy. Copenhagen is pursuing the goal that by 2015, 20% of the food consumed in the city will be organic – 80% in municipal institutions.

The Swedish city of Växjö, which reduced its carbon footprint by 32% between 1993 and 2007 and is chasing 50% by 2010 and 70% by 2025, en-route to being a fossil-fuel-free city, is increasing the purchase of ecological foodstuffs for municipal institutions to 25% in 2010. They have also set a goal that 30% of the surrounding farmland should be managed ecologically by 2015.

In North America, Berkeley has included a goal in its Climate Action Plan that by 2050, “the majority of food consumed in the city is produced locally – i.e. within a few hundred miles”, and it has matched this with 20 actions, including public education about the merits of vegetarian and vegan food.

We can no longer ignore the impact that meat has on our planet and our health. Will one of BC's municipalities – or perhaps the Legislative Assembly itself – lead the way, and start serving only vegetarian food one day a week?

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