

## Why is the 'eat less meat' message such a hard sell?

By ELEANOR BOYLE

Eating less meat is one of the most effective steps any of us can take to fight climate change, as Nicholas Read points out in his insightful article in *The Vancouver Sun* last week.

However, as he demonstrates, despite evidence that intensive meat production contributes significantly to global warming, and to further threats to public health and environment such as water pollution, most citizen and environmental groups play down the issue. They ask people to walk more and turn off lights, but usually steer clear of the meat question.

As an educator working on this issue, I can concur that the Eat Less Meat message is a hard sell, even for groups dedicated to sustainability.

Why the resistance? Both for sustainability professionals and for their audiences, some people understandably just don't want to eat less of foods they enjoy. Others consume animal products out of habit or convenience, or because they believe meat-eating conveys sophistication, or affluence, or virility.

But one key source of resistance to the Eat Less Meat message is a belief, even among some environmentalists, that food decisions constitute a sacred kind of "personal choice" that society cannot, or should not, seek to influence.

This argument doesn't stand up to analysis.

Deciding what to eat is no more personal choice than are other consumption decisions. All are shaped by culture, family and habit. We are not born craving chicken wings or pork chops. Humans' innate food desires are for salt, fats and sugars, which can be obtained in many ways and do not require much, or any, meat.

Particular grocery purchases do not necessarily reflect individuality or personal identity. When people buy beef burgers rather than veggie ones, it is partly in response to years of ads and special-interest messages that animal products are delicious, nutritious, and necessary to health — all of which are debatable.

But such powerful messages get repeated at home and in school, then shape buying patterns for life. Our decisions about what to eat are therefore already influenced, and

not just by agribusiness marketers. Governments often encourage excessive meat consumption despite its contribution to environmental problems and its links to stroke, heart disease, and cancers. Believe it or not, some of our federal and provincial tax dollars go to support and subsidize intensive factory farming, resulting in artificially low prices for meat that do not reflect the environmental, health and social costs.

So policy and practice already shape people's eating choices, frequently in the wrong direction for personal and global health.

There's another reason it is justifiable to promote ecological dining habits. As a society, we long ago decided it is our responsibility to affect and even regulate citizens' behavioural choices which might

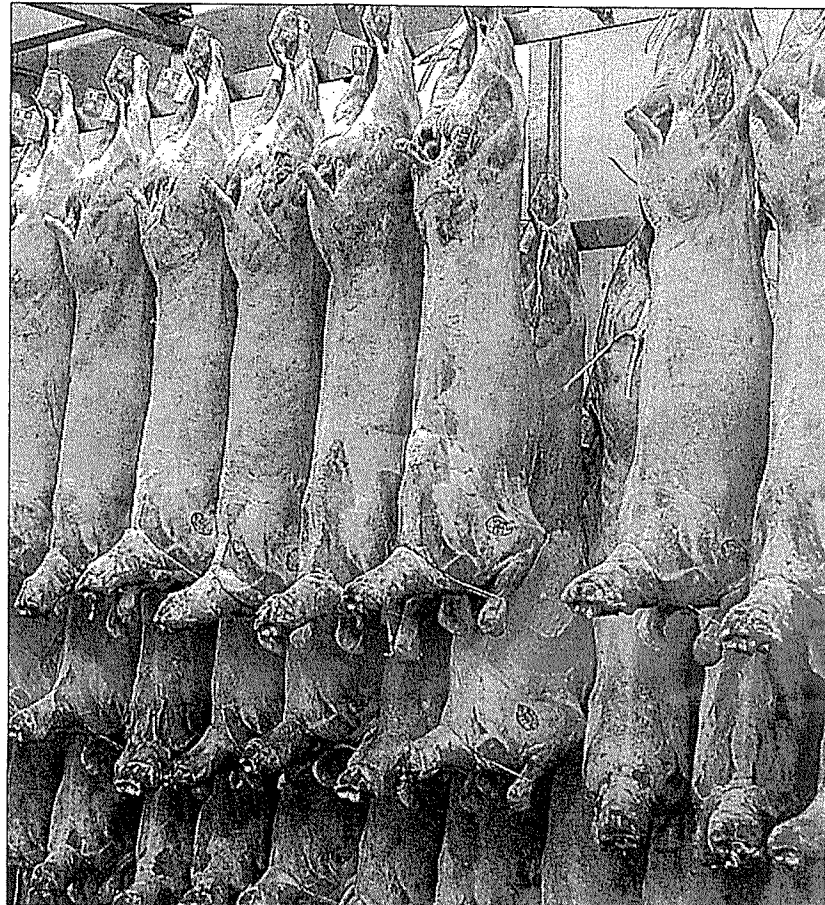
harm others or the community as a whole. Smoking is a personal choice as much as is meat-eating, but we constrain and regulate cigarette use. Driving fast on city streets is a personal choice some people

would like the freedom to make, but we've decided that would be too dangerous for the rest of us.

Besides, environmentalists do ask people to change their diets. While some feel they can't ask people to eat less meat, they do urge everyone to "eat local." This is despite academic studies demonstrating that, while consuming locally produced food is a good idea for many reasons, consuming less meat would do more for planetary sustainability.

In a ground-breaking 2006 study from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, agricultural economist Henning Steinfeld showed that livestock and meat production are responsible for 18 per cent of global greenhouse gases, more than all of transport.

How much less meat will we need to eat? Take a deep breath. According to acclaimed epidemiologist Anthony McMichael, writing in the medical journal *The Lancet* last year, meat production is so damaging to the environment and public health that a strong international program is required to regulate consumption. He and his team propose a maximum global target of 90



GEORGE PANDI/CNS

The global demand for meat, including pork like this shown at Rungis market in France, is not something that can be easily changed.

grams of meat per person each day.

For industrialized countries such as Canada, where the average citizen eats more than 200 grams of meat daily, the equivalent of at least two burgers every 24 hours, that means a decrease of more than 50 per cent.

But humans are adaptable and habits can change. A few courageous local groups such as the Vancouver Humane Society and Earthsave Canada are spreading the word that we are more than capable of eating less meat. Larger organizations such as Greenpeace and the David Suzuki Foundation have recognized the issue.

Meanwhile, it would help for all of us to lighten up on the distinction between vegetarians and carnivores. Consumption of animal products doesn't need to be all-or-nothing. Meat-eaters can indulge without doing so every day and every meal.

For purely environmental reasons it is not necessary that we all become vegetarian. Some meat production, particularly local, small-

scale, and organic, is a venerable and potentially ecological part of mixed farming systems.

The problem stems from the growing quantities of chicken and pork that humans demand today, which cannot be supplied by traditional, low-tech, and sustainable methods.

Putting meat at the centre of every plate requires large-scale, intensive factory farming, fuelled by huge amounts of feed and fossil fuels, emitting greenhouse gases and animal wastes in amounts that overwhelm the environment.

We can and should move meat to the side of the plate.

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