

Hoofing It Toward Sustainability

by Nate Downey

Maybe I had just read *Modern Meat*. Or maybe the bumpersticker that says "SAVE A COW. Eat an environmentalist!" finally got my goat. All I know for sure is that we were planning Earth Day events when the question shot out from nowhere.

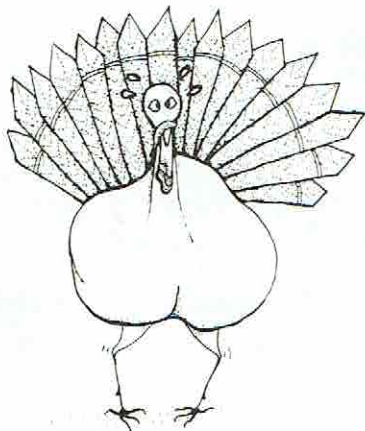
"Nate, You're a vegetarian. Aren't you?"

"Uhhhh, Yes!" was my reply. (As of this very moment, I meant.) Despite my intentions for the previous five years, I had failed to fully commit myself to vegetarianism. I guess I had just been chicken. I made up my mind then and there. "You're looking at the new, improved, meat-free me!"

For several months the answer stayed "Yes." No bones about it.

Unfortunately, peer pressure and ideals were sorry substitutes for the fat in the flesh. Days without cravings were rare, and my efforts to harness myself were far from well done. Earth Day came, and I ate three Whoppers® in the time it takes to burn an acre of rainforest. So, tail between my legs, I left the environmental movement for pursuits that better fit my savage soul.

Then, I found permaculture, the eco-ethical system that calls carnivores to the table! I ate it up! I have now gobbled up my first homegrown turkey, and poached my first unindustrial eggs. I'm on my way, hoofing it toward sustainability on Camino con Carné.



For those who can be happy, whole-hearted vegetarians, not eating animals is, in many ways, the more rational road. There are fewer shelters to build, fewer fences to maintain, less land to buy or lease and absolutely no vet bills to pay. There's less shit to wipe off your boots, less blood to wash off your hands, less sleep to miss in the morning due to cocky roosters. Meat-free means time free, and that can be spent relaxing with tequila (hold the worm). It's as simple as

Mollison's Law of Return and the equation: "work is pollution."

Vegetarians report that their way abates feelings of guilt at mealtime. In the case of industrial food production, this is a cogent argument. Life on the factory farm is impoverished, brutish, nasty and short; energy is wasted at a cataclysmic rate, and the pollution is unbearable. (Much of this is also true, however, of the plant part of industrial agriculture with its monopolization of habitats, monocultures, plowing practices, chemical fertilizers and pesticides.)

In a mature permaculture system, however, there is no call for guilt. Animals live well; energy is reinvested; and pollution is unheard of.¹

Even if vegetarian systems require less energy than meat-eating systems, it does not necessarily follow that the former is better than the latter. Permaculture's goal is to design resilient systems by optimizing the number of diverse relationships in the system. The presence of animals in the system and meat in the diet promote this goal. Animals can control pests; create fertilizer, blood meal and bone meal; till soil; recycle wastes and produce heat. Their shelters and fences provide vertical space, shade and wind protection. All of this increases crop yields. Animals clothe us in wool, down, fur and leather. If we wanted to stay warm in winter, dry in spring, cool in summer, and keep the bugs off in the fall, there sure would be a lot of cotton pickin' work on a farm without animals!

Without animals, there would be less information. If, as astute permaculture practitioners, we observe animal behavior, we learn valuable lessons from their patterns. Using heightened senses and keener instincts, animals serve not only as wake up calls and burglar alarms, but also as weathermen and detectors of microclimate. (Observe where they hang out in cold weather,

when their coats thicken and appetites increase, and which plants they select for nutrition).

Most humans are omnivores; our systems evolved to digest and metabolize both meat and plants. But we are not all the same. Our different body types evolved over time in our ancestral environments. Tropical people can thrive on a fruit-and-vegetable diet that would never be sufficient for northern peoples living in harsher climates.²

Some vegetarians in search of spiritual connection feel that not eating meat allows for a higher vibration while some meat-eaters affirm that eating organic meat engages them in complete cycles of meaningful life and death, and helps to ground them and supply them with necessary iron and B vitamins.

The real question is: What is a healthy way for you? Every individual is different, and even one person's needs vary over time. At best, we listen to our bodies, and talk with good nutritionists and holistic doctors.

Once each of us has a feel for how much meat, if any, is best for us, we can design the animals into our permaculture systems. As our designs evolve, let's say we can see that a certain animal species would perform several important functions in our systems—the only problem is that to eat it would be to boldly go where we haven't gone for years, and we're not quite ready to revive that trek. No problem! Sell the enterprise the day it matures (in order to get the most out of our investment). Or better yet, start with a male and female, and sell them after establishing the next generation.

The broad question about meat is moot. The decision depends first on each individual's body, then on his/her culture and environment, and finally on his/her ability to design a productive system so that all the animals live well and harness far more energy for their homelands than they consume.

Nate Downey started Santa Fe Permaculture, a landscape and design company, in 1992. He and his partner, Melissa McDonald, are building soil, growing food and raising poultry in the understory of an apple orchard in Velarde, New Mexico.

¹ **Ed. Note:** Furthermore, there are landscapes where animals are the most efficient converters of the existing plant energy and where food and protein are virtually unavailable in quantity and quality suitable for human consumption, except by way of animal converters (e.g., goats in high-desert country with sparse grass and sagebrush, or grasslands where buffalo, elk, cattle and antelope serve as walking biological harvesters, converters of plant material, and fertilizers).

² **Ed. Note:** The Hunzas of the Himalayas have had a record number of centenarians who eat chicken until they die. Their chicken, however, has been free-range, and free of antibiotics, steroids and pesticides.