

# Sierra Club

## Sustainable Consumption Committee

Spring Newsletter: 3,000 Miles

*The Sierra Club launches its....*

### “True Cost of Food” Campaign

*Article by Michael Beck*

The United States, with less than five percent of the world’s people, consumes over twenty five percent of its resources.

And that’s not even the bad news: the really scary news is that the rest of the planet is scrambling to catch up with our lifestyle. If all 6.4 billion people did so, we’d need **four** more Earths to accommodate them.

In response, the Sierra Club Sustainable Consumption Committee has launched a new, national grassroots campaign. It’s focused on the one major aspect of American consumption that’s probably the easiest to change: our dietary lifestyle. American food production has a huge impact on the environment:

- Agriculture is the largest source of water pollution in the US.
- Our industrialized farming poisons the soil, encourages pests, and destroys biodiversity.
- Three fourths of the land in the continental United States is devoted to agriculture or grazing, and much of the cropland produces grain for cows, not people.

The Club expends enormous resources fighting the symptoms of unsustainable agriculture, from water pollution and toxins in the food chain to loss of habitat and species.

What the Club has not previously done is to seriously challenge the **root cause** of the above: American food consumption patterns. By and large, our diet is so unsustainably produced that it jeopardizes not just the environment but also our health. Our diet completely ignores the **true** cost of food.

That’s about to change.

We’re responding with the “True Cost of Food” campaign to make the Club a leader in sustainable eating. Our goal is an America that eats a diet that is as much as possible:

- Plant-Based;
- Organically Produced; and
- Locally Grown.

The first prong of this campaign is building a nationwide network of activists who will target local markets to provide more food that is organically grown, locally produced, and reasonably priced. These goals are practical and do-able. There already exists a pent-up public demand for organic products. Rapidly growing numbers of local farmers want to give up their dependence on poisons. And the Sierra Club already has the ideal structure and experience to galvanize this movement.

*continued on page 4...*

## Sustainable Food Choices

*Article by Bonnie Lane Weber*

Sustainable consumption is the use of goods and services that satisfy basic needs and improve quality of life while minimizing the usage of irreplaceable natural resources. We all need to consciously think about our food choices in terms of sustainability and appreciate the effect these choices have on the environment. Listed below are some ideas and suggestions to consider implementing in your personal food choices to help minimize our impact on the environment through the food we eat.

- Eat lower on the food chain. Raising grain and vegetables for human consumption is more efficient than feeding it to animals, which are then in turn eaten by humans.
- Make food choices without regard to advertising and teach your children to think independently about the food they eat. Large food companies spend as much money to influence our food choices as is spent to influence tobacco sales – their goals are not the same as yours.
- Eat the greatest variety of the least processed food.
- Buy locally grown food and/or organically grown food. The further food is shipped to arrive at its consumer, the more pollution it creates through fossil fuel-based means of transportation. Some food grown overseas is doused with chemicals that are not allowed to be used here in the US. In these ways, purchasing organic and locally grown food cuts down on the amount of chemicals going into the soil and water (and into our food) and pollution going into the air.
- Shop at farmers' markets. Find farmers markets on <http://www.localharvest.com>. Join a CSA. Check <http://www.csacenter.org> to find a CSA near you. Eat at local restaurants that use local farmers' products. Ask in restaurants and stores where the food is from. Encourage them to buy locally. Compliment them on the delicious local items that they do carry.
- Ask food store managers to stock locally-grown items when they are available and in-season. Many food store managers say that if they get two requests for a product, they will stock it. Our voices and dollars do count!
- Share local and sustainable food choice ideas. Introduce nutrition education to others. Encourage the buying of local produce in your local school, place of worship, and work.
- Eat less meat. When you do buy meat, seek out grass-fed, free range or "locally raised" meat. Much of the cheap meat available in supermarkets is raised in Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) which cause enormous environmental problems. Tremendous amounts of untreated animal waste are typically dumped into 'lagoons' that are prone to overflowing. In 1997, heavy rains in North Carolina caused the waste pits from huge pig farms to burst, resulting in the death of 450,000 fish. Animals in the CAFOs need antibiotics to keep them healthy in their confined areas. In fact, 70% of all antibiotics in the United States are used for this purpose.
- If you choose to eat fish, select species that are harvested sustainably. Carry the Audubon Seafood Wallet card with you and consult it when you go to restaurants to ensure that you are buying fish from healthy, thriving stocks. The card is available from <http://seafood.audubon.org>. Avoid eating "bill fish," and swordfish in particular, and tell owners of fish stores and restaurants they should not be carrying them. Their stocks are dangerously depleted. Avoid eating farm-raised salmon.
- Learn to cook. Share recipes. Eat together often with family and friends.
- Learn more about sustainable food choices at [www.sierraclub.org/sustainable\\_consumption/food\\_factsheet.asp](http://www.sierraclub.org/sustainable_consumption/food_factsheet.asp).

### *So What's With the Newsletter Title?*

"We are spending far more energy to get food to the table than the energy we get from eating the food. A head of lettuce grown in the Salinas Valley of California and shipped nearly 3,000 miles to Washington, D.C., requires about 36 times as much fossil fuel energy in transport as it provides in food energy when it arrives."

*Source: Worldwatch Paper #163: Home Grown: The Case For Local Food In A Global Market. By Brian Halweil, November 2002.*

"Just as there is an ethic to growing food there is also an ethic to eating. As we continue to be more aware of what we are eating, we must also think about how we eat. The ritual of coming together to break bread was once the basis of community; yet with the onset of instant dinners and television, fewer and fewer meals are eaten together; more often than not we now consume our food alone and 'on the run.' This disrespects food and ourselves. Let us reclaim the family and community meal where values are taught and senses are heightened" (Alice Waters).

## Meat, Human Health, and the Environment

Article by Diana Artemis

### *BSE is just the tip of the iceberg...*

Think BSE is the only cause for alarm from eating high on the food chain?

While the public currently focuses on the risk of BSE to people eating meat, this may be just the tip of the iceberg when considering risks to human health and the environment, not to mention the cruelty suffered by the sentient beings we choose to classify as “food animals.”

#### ***Upcoming Feature: Greening Your Energy Bill***

Many sustainably-minded consumers and businesses want to switch to renewable energy, but become mired in a confusing tangle of utility options, constraints and limitations. However, greening your energy bill need not be so frustrating. In an upcoming Sustainable Consumption Committee newsletter, find out which of three common ways to green your energy bill best suits your sustainable consumption practices.

While cattle have been considered the most likely species to have passed transmittable encephalopathies to humans, they are not the only species under scrutiny. As *The Lancet* reported on April 6, 1996, other animals have routinely been fed offal containing rendered cow and sheep remains:

*Sheep, pigs and chickens have also been exposed to BSE and scrapie-contaminated feed. Whilst there is no evidence of natural transmission of BSE to these species, it would be prudent to remain open-minded about dietary exposure [1]*

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) reports that between 1979 and 1990, 2,614 cases of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease were documented in the U.S. and “the possibility that a BSE-like agent played a role in some of these cases cannot be ruled out” [2]. PCRM goes on to say that the consumption of livestock products is clearly linked to a much higher risk of serious and sometimes fatal diseases. “These diseases include coronary artery disease, colon and possibly other forms of cancer, diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and infection with salmonella, campylobacter, and *E. coli*, among others” [3].

If our preference for eating animal products is strongly implicated in the current epidemic of obesity and our modern killer diseases, it is indelibly linked to the devastation of our planet. Consider the following figures, which are also just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the symptoms of a planetary disease:

Agriculture consumes 80% of the water in the United States. Groundwater is being withdrawn 25% faster than it gets replenished [4]. Animal agriculture is the number one cause of water pollution. The EPA reports that 36% of rivers and streams and 39% of lakes are impaired by pollution. Food factory farming is responsible for 70% of river pollution and 49% of lake pollution [5]. In the U.S., 130 times more animal manure is produced than human waste [6]. Animal waste is linked to the formation of dead zones of hypoxia (low oxygen) where most aquatic life cannot survive [7] and outbreaks of toxic microbes, including *Pfiesteria piscicida*, in coastal waters killing fish by the hundreds of thousands. Humans exposed to *Pfiesteria* have suffered memory loss, respiratory problems and skin rashes [8].

Meat production wastes a lot of energy. A plant-based diet requires one-half the fossil fuels to produce its food in comparison to an animal-based diet. The number of food calories produced for each fossil fuel calorie expended is 4.2 for soybeans, 2.5 for corn, and 2.2 for wheat, but 0.15 for chicken, 0.07 for beef, and 0.04 for pork [9].

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## “True Cost of Food” Campaign Launch

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The second prong is educational. We’re producing brochures and fact sheets for activists, and articles for local newsletters. We’re completely re-doing our website: [http://www.sierraclub.org/sustainable\\_consumption](http://www.sierraclub.org/sustainable_consumption). This campaign has one special advantage: It shows environmentally-minded people how they can **immediately** start making a big environmental difference in their everyday lives. That’s empowerment. And empowered people are already halfway to becoming activists. Consider the value of this one fact on someone who is already trying to conserve water: It takes 2,500 gallons of water to produce a pound of beef. This equals a five-minute shower every day for six months!

The third prong is a concept we are popularizing: “Sustainable Tuesdays.” On Tuesdays, we encourage everyone (not just activists) to make a fun-filled effort to live more lightly on our planet. This might entail a group outing for a pre-arranged sustainable meal at a local restaurant, or an intimate sustainable potluck family dinner. We could turn the thermostat up or down, depending on the season. We could walk or use alternate transportation if possible. Maybe we could hike in the park with a friend instead of going shopping. The main thing is to make it fun!

Our “True Cost of Food” campaign can potentially bring a whole new group of people into the heart of the Club. There are thousands of environmentally sensitive folks who don’t gravitate to our more traditional efforts on land use, pollution, and other issues. But they will warm up to a campaign like this. We can find countless allies in the following communities:

- The organic food or vegetarian movements.
- The health community.
- The simple-living movement.

The Club’s traditional work on forests, habitat, clean air, and other issues must be strengthened. Few things will help more than addressing one root cause of these problems: the wasteful and excessive consumption in our society.

That’s where the Sustainable Consumption Committee comes in. Switching consumer demand to low-impact food is our current focus area, but we will also educate on sustainable wood production, energy use, water consumption, and related issues. Furthermore, we plan to talk about the Madison-Avenue-driven, buy-and-consume craze that has virtually become our national religion.

We’d love to have you get involved at any level of activity you’re comfortable with. Please contact our volunteer coordinator Gordon LaBedz at [glabedzmd@aol.com](mailto:glabedzmd@aol.com).

Are you a Club activist with too much on your plate? Here’s an easy way to help! You probably know someone that has an interest in sustainable food or belongs to one of the above-mentioned communities. This person ought to be delighted to find out the Club is working on this; we ask that you encourage this person (or people) to contact Gordon. Thank you!

## Meat, Human Health and the Environment

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Eating low on the food chain is the single most important action you can take to protect the environment, protect your health and the health of your children, and move towards a sustainable lifestyle.

### Sources:

- [1] J. Collinge and M. Rossor, “A New Variant of Prion Disease.” *Lancet* 1996: 347, 916-7.
- [2] N. Barnard, “Mad Cow Disease: The Risk to the U.S.” PCRM White Paper. 1998.
- [3] *ibid.*
- [4] D. Pimentel and M. Pimentel, *Food, Energy and Society*. Revised edition. University of Colorado Press. 1996.
- [5] U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, *Animal Waste Pollution in America: An Emerging National Problem*. December 1997.
- [6] World Watch Institute, “United States Leads World Meat Stampede.” Press briefing, July 2, 1998.
- [7] *ibid.*
- [8] U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, *Animal Waste Pollution in America: An Emerging National Problem*. December 1997.
- [9] D. Pimental, “Soil Erosion and Agricultural Productivity.” in *World Soil Erosion and Conservation*, Cambridge University Press. 1993: 277-292.

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