

## THE ENVIRONMENT

## MARGARET LUNDBERG

Margaret Lundberg grew up in Fremont, California, and moved to Washington state as a newlywed in 1976. A former art teacher, she made her living as a freelance muralist and decorator for nearly two decades before deciding to return to college. After graduating from Tacoma Community College in 2011 with an associate's degree in politics, philosophy, and economics, she transferred to the University of Washington, Tacoma. She completed a BA in arts, media, and culture, with a minor in education, in 2013 and obtained a curatorial position at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma.

## Eating Green

Why go vegan? Lundberg explores several answers to the question, finding one especially compelling. In arguing the environmental benefits of a restricted diet, she expands on both Bill McKibben's and Derrick Jensen's proposals in the previous two essays. "Eating Green" was published in the 2010 edition of *Una Voce*, a collection of work by students in the first-year writing course at Tacoma Community College. Lundberg revised her essay for this book in 2013.

Lundberg's researched essay follows MLA style for documenting sources, discussed on pages 70–83.

When I was a child, our family's diet was important to my mother. We had two vegetables with every meal, ate plain yogurt for breakfast, and exercised with Jack LaLanne. Later, as a young mom myself, I learned to cook meals from scratch, froze and canned fresh produce, and did aerobics with Jane Fonda. I was concerned with my sons' nutrition, having learned early that good health didn't just happen — you had to work for it. Now that my family circle has widened to include grandchildren, I find that my concerns go beyond just the health of my own family, to the health of the planet we live on. I believe that our personal and global health is tightly interconnected, and what benefits one will benefit the other.

I became a vegetarian about three years ago, and "went vegan" last spring. I could tout all sorts of reasons, but suffice it to say that I look and feel better at fifty-two than I did five years ago. For my health and well-being, becoming a vegetarian was the best thing I could have done. Which got me thinking — what if we could establish that a vegetarian diet would benefit not only our

personal health, but the health of the planet as well? Between pollution, greenhouse gases, and dependence on a dwindling supply of fossil fuels, our little blue planet isn't feeling too well. If all of us adopting a vegetarian diet could slow or stop all of these ills, shouldn't we consider it? The idea is not as far-fetched as it might sound: a vegetarian diet could be "just what the doctor ordered" for our global health.

In March of 1984, I was on a bus headed to the airport in Jerusalem, traveling with a group of American tourists on our way home from a two-week trip to Israel. We had been exposed to incredible sights, smells, and experiences during our trip, yet on that last evening we were all feeling a bit homesick. And each of us was asking the same question: "Where's the beef?"<sup>1</sup> We had just come from an amazing dinner at an Arab restaurant in East Jerusalem, yet we were all longing for a hamburger — Golden Arches, here we come! Eating meat is such a big part of the American way of life that it almost feels unpatriotic to spurn it. Would it still be Thanksgiving without the turkey, the Fourth of July without the hamburgers, a baseball game without the hotdogs? All of these things seem to be permanently interwoven into our culture. We just like meat.

But the great American love affair with burgers and fries also has a dark side. Just as the standard American diet is killing us individually — with skyrocketing rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and a host of other ills — it is also having devastating effects on our planet. Pollution, global warming, and an alarming dependence on fossil fuels can all be traced back, in large part, to the agricultural practices that are required to feed our ever-growing craving for meat. Dietician Kate Geagan compares the environmental impact of the American diet with that of "our love affair with SUVs," warning that the energy use involved in the "production, transport, processing, packaging, storing, and preparation [of food] is now the single largest contributor to global warming" (x).

Livestock production in this country and throughout the Western world has come a long way from the era of the American cowboy. The days of cattle grazing serenely on huge expanses of prairie pasture land are pretty much over. As Michael Pollan points out, raising cattle and other livestock is a multi-billion dollar operation that is now more manufacturing plant than traditional ranching. Cows no longer spend their lives grazing the hillsides until they are ready for slaughter. They are warehoused and fed a diet that is contrary to their very physiology — intended to eat grass, they are now fattened on corn, in as short a time as possible. In the early 1900s it took four to five years to ready a steer for slaughter; it now takes fourteen to sixteen months. The

<sup>1</sup> Advertising slogan for the hamburger chain Wendy's (1984–85). — Eds.

corn-based diet they are fed leads to a variety of health issues for the cattle (77, 82–83). In his article “The Ecology of Eating: The Power of the Fork,” Mark Hyman states, “Of the 24 million pounds of antibiotics produced each year in this country, 19 million are put in the factory-farmed animals’ feed to prevent infection, which results from overcrowding, and to prevent the cow’s stomach from exploding with gas from the fermentation of the corn” (15). As a result of what is basically indigestion, he explains, cattle belch vast amounts of methane, which is twenty-three times more potent at trapping heat than carbon dioxide. Livestock manure is the source of two-thirds of the man-made nitrous oxide now circulating in our atmosphere — a greenhouse gas that is three hundred times more potent than carbon dioxide (14).

Other statistics are equally grim. Kate Geagan reports that livestock raised for meat production are responsible for 18% of greenhouse gas emissions — more than the cars we drive. The average household could make a bigger impact on greenhouse gas emissions by cutting their meat consumption in half than by cutting their driving in half! The food sector is responsible for 20% of the total energy use in the United States every year, and most of that comes from the raising and packaging of livestock animals (30).

A nonvegetarian diet requires 2.9 times more water, 2.5 times more energy, 13 times more fertilizer (also made from petroleum products), and 1.4 times more pesticides than does a vegetarian diet — and the greatest difference comes from beef consumption (Marlow et al. 1699S). Less than half of the harvested acreage in the United States is used to grow food for people, and it takes sixteen pounds of grain and soybeans fed to cattle to get one pound of meat ready for us to eat. Ten times as much land is required for meat-protein production than is required for plant-protein production, and producing one pound of animal protein uses almost a hundred times more water than it takes to produce one pound of plant protein (Vegan Society). Already, says journalist Pat Joseph, more than 20% of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil has been cleared to meet global demand for beef; it is now home to cattle ranches and the soybean farms needed to feed the livestock (128). We have yet to understand what the continuing loss of rainforest will cost us in the long run, but at the very least tropical deforestation contributes 70% of Brazil’s release of carbon dioxide levels into the atmosphere (Joseph 109).

As a population’s income rises, its people have traditionally eaten more meat and dairy foods, replacing wheat and rice in their diets — exactly what we have been experiencing over the last fifty years (Bittman). Nevertheless, between global warming and decreased natural resources such as farmable land and water, the earth simply can’t support any greater increase in meat production. In my lifetime, the world population has doubled, and it is still

growing exponentially. Yet, with finite resources, how will we continue to feed us all? Factory farming is simply unsustainable. Even Dennis Avery, director of the Centre for Global Food Issues (a very pro-livestock organization), has commented that “[t]he world must create 5 billion vegans in the next several decades, or triple its total farm output without using more land” (qtd. in Vegan Society). If he thinks so, it *must* be time to rethink our diet!

But what about our burgers? For far too many of us, giving up meat seems like an unreasonable thing to ask. Meat is good for us, isn’t it? “Meat has tremendous nutritional value and is very good for you,” argues Randall Huffman, vice president of scientific affairs for the American Meat Institute. Huffman says that “even the fat in meat is — in some respects — healthy. Fully one third of the saturated fat found in meat is stearic acid, which actually helps lower blood cholesterol levels” (qtd. in Masci 132). Maybe. But the average American consumes nearly 200 pounds of meat a year — 33% more than five decades ago. We eat about 110 grams of protein a day (more than three-quarters of which is animal protein), while the USDA’s Food Pyramid recommends less than half that — an amount still nearly twice the 30 grams most other experts say we actually *need* (Bittman). Since the advent of products like McDonald’s Quarter Pounder with Cheese (30 grams of protein all by itself!), it has become entirely too easy to eat much more meat than any of us could ever need. Our expanding waistlines and rising levels of diabetes and heart disease prove that any benefit we might gain from a modest amount of meat in our diet is being overcome by the sheer amount we are eating on a daily basis.

With growing evidence that human activities in general — and livestock production in particular — are causing large-scale environmental effects, many major corporations are attempting to make changes and “do their part” for the environment. A group of dairy farmers in New York state, for example, is teaming with General Electric to produce renewable energy from cow manure. Apparently manure from 2,500 cows can generate enough electricity for 200 homes. In a state with over 600,000 dairy cows, that’s a lot of potential kilowatts. “We’ve estimated that this could generate \$38 million in new revenue for dairy farmers around the country and offset 2 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalents annually by 2020,” says Rick Naczi, executive vice president at Dairy Management Inc., in a press release (“GE, US Dairy”). Naczi reports that the dairy industry has committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 25% by 2020 — the equivalent of getting “1.25 million passenger cars off the road every year.” That’s a lot of gas.

But even if we *can* make electricity from “cow pies,” does that make up for the fact that we in the Western world are using far more than our fair share

of the earth's limited resources? We use substantial amounts of fossil fuels and other nonrenewable resources to grow a "crop" that many in our global population cannot access; one that pollutes and sickens the planet — and its inhabitants — in ways we are only beginning to comprehend. In the face of a looming worldwide crisis where food prices are rising and nearly 3 billion people earn less than two dollars a day, two of every three people in the world already subsist on a vegetarian diet (Clemmit 1). Yet in the industrialized world over 50% of the grain that we grow is used to fatten livestock (Hyman 14). Peter Timmer, a fellow at the Washington-based Center for Global Development, states, "There's still plenty of food for everyone, but only if everyone eats a grain and legume-based diet. If the diet includes large . . . amounts of animal protein . . . , food demand is running ahead of global production" (qtd. in Clemmit 3).

With finite resources already being stretched thin by a growing global population, is it rational for us to continue on as we are? Our food systems are not sustainable, and today's livestock production methods make potential food crises more likely every day. If greenhouse gases continue to build as they have over the last fifty years, the effects on today's farmlands may be irreversible. As global temperatures continue to rise, Alaska may become the new "Corn Belt" and the Midwest could become a desert. How much of the land we now depend on to feed us could be lost to agriculture? A vegetarian diet would enable us to healthfully feed many more people, and make much better use of the resources we have. Do we really want to wait until it's too late to change our way of eating?

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For a reading quiz, visit [bedfordstmartins.com/thebedfordreader](http://bedfordstmartins.com/thebedfordreader).

### Journal Writing

In your journal, respond to Lundberg's contention that we should all become vegetarians because of the "large-scale environmental effects" (par. 10) of the industrialized raising of livestock. How persuaded are you by her argument? Do you agree that giving up meat would help to slow global warming and ensure that everyone on the planet can continue to be fed, or can you think of alternative solutions? What are they? (To take your journal writing further, see "From Journal to Essay" on the next page.)

### Questions on Meaning

1. What is Lundberg's THESIS, and where does she state it?
2. How, according to Lundberg, does "the standard American diet" (par. 4) damage the environment? SUMMARIZE the main points she uses to support her claim.
3. Why does Lundberg note that the nitrous oxide released by cow manure is "a greenhouse gas that is three hundred times more potent than carbon dioxide" (par. 5)? What point is she making here?
4. What does Lundberg ASSUME about her AUDIENCE? To what extent do you fit her assumptions?
5. What would you say is Lundberg's PURPOSE in this argument? Does she really expect readers to give up meat entirely? What evidence in the essay supports your answer?

### Questions on Writing Strategy

1. Why do you suppose Lundberg opens the essay as she does? What does she accomplish by discussing her personal health and diet? What is the EFFECT of her



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