

# Eating Earth

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Environmental Ethics and  
Dietary Choice

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# Introduction

WHEN I WAS in my twenties on a Watson Fellowship that took me to the Tibetan Plateau, I met an Irishman at a low-end restaurant. We had dinner together. Though each of us had met many other people in our travels, there was something magnetic about our connection—I refer to the negative ends of a magnet. We disagreed about pretty much everything. At the time, I would best have been described as a budding philosopher, ethicist, atheist, feminist, and animal liberationist; he was a scientist, mathematician, born-again Christian, and environmentalist. Ideologically we had almost nothing in common, but since we had both been traveling for months with little opportunity to speak English (and even less to engage in meaningful discussions) we spent our days together . . . and argued almost perpetually.

Because we tended to meet at dinner, and because I was a vegetarian, our disagreements usually began over food, then spread to innumerable other areas of discord. Despite the discord, we continued our discussions long after we returned to our respective homes. Yet neither reason nor heartfelt pleas shifted the Irishman to a plant-based diet. He was sympathetic to human moral responsibilities for animal suffering (ever the Christian), but on learning of the cruelty of animal agriculture, he merely shifted to “happy meat” and the eggs of “free range” chickens. Though I feverishly pointed to the horrific transport and dependable adolescent slaughter of grass-fed and “free range” animals, and the absence of any nutritional need for animal products in our diet, my energy was wasted. Ultimately, it was the Irishman’s concern for the environment, combined with his predilection for numbers, that altered his dietary choices.

Recently my friend composed an essay for an anthology I was putting together, *about animal advocacy and environmentalism and the search for common ground*. In the process, he applied his math and science skills to calculate the ratio of the mass of wild birds to the ratio of the mass of chickens in the U.K.—1:104. His horror was palpable despite his wry response: “For every ten grams of wild bird, somewhere out there (and close) lies a full kilo of chicken.” In that moment he fully *felt* the link between dietary choice and environmental degradation for the first time. Reflecting on this discovery, he wrote: “This was a ‘Eureka’ moment, a dark one, a moment that has informed everything since.”

Had I understood the environmental impact of consuming animal products when we met in Tibet, perhaps I might have had more success in persuading my friend to shift toward toward a plant-based diet two decades earlier. This was also a eureka moment for me, and it is my inspiration for writing *Eating Earth*.

## Ethics and Dietary Choice

Even among environmentalists, few things are as habitual and devoid of conscious thought and scrutiny as what we put into our mouths. This is especially true when we are young: We eat what we are served, and for the most part what we are served when young becomes the basis of what we consume as adults. Our diets don’t generally change unless or until someone or something (usually new information or relocation) causes us to see certain foods differently, at which time we discover previously overlooked foods, or perhaps food favorites become morally questionable.

Though our dietary choices tend to be inherited and habitual, we make many choices within this given framework. For example, we might choose not to eat crabs or deer or ducks or herring or strawberries—even though everyone around us does so. *Morally speaking, this ability to choose is critical*. If someone engages in an immoral act, but was compelled to do so at gunpoint, this case must be taken separately from ones in which a moral agent chooses his or her actions in the absence of fear or coercion. Moral accountability presupposes a certain ability to *choose* between one action and another. Though diet is largely a matter of culture and tradition, and though finances and access restrict options for many people, it is likely that anyone reading this book has considerable dietary choice.

## Who Is “We”?

Even in wealthy nations there are many people who have little choice regarding food consumption.<sup>1</sup> For example, reasonably priced fresh fruits and vegetables are not necessarily available to inner-city residents, many of whom do not own private transportation, which limits where families are likely to shop, especially poor families who must think carefully about the cost of additional bus fares. Nor is it possible for most inner-city individuals to throw a few seeds in the ground and wait for greens to emerge. Similarly, in other regions of the world poorer people tend to have little choice in what they put on the table. Sadly, while most Americans have tremendous choice regarding diet, many people around the world are happy to have something—anything—on the table. Poverty limits food choices, as does isolation. Because choice is critical to moral accountability, *Eating Earth* is written for those who have a reasonable measure of choice regarding diet: *This book is not intended as a criticism of those who have little or no choice in what they consume.*

This book is about environmental ethics and dietary choice. It is therefore written about and for human beings who have various options with regard to what they eat, and can only legitimately speak to those who have access to a variety of foods and who *choose* what they will bring to the table. Those who have little or no choice regarding diet cannot reasonably be held morally accountable in the same way as those who, like myself, choose to be either an omnivore or a vegan, for example. Again, if you are reading this book, it is highly likely that you have a reasonable measure of choice as to what you consume.

Because the largest population of those for whom this book is written (English-reading individuals who have a choice in what they eat) are likely to be in the United States, much of the information in this book focuses on the U.S., but I have often included information from other nations and regions of the world, especially in light of the fact that environmental concerns tend to be international.

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1. For insights into different foodways in the U.S., please see A. Breeze Harper, ed., *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society* (New York: Lantern, 2010). Also, check out the Food Empowerment Project online (<http://www.foodispower.org/>).

## What Do Animal Agriculture, Fisheries, and Hunting Have in Common?

The first two chapters of this book focus on a particular dietary choice: Animal agriculture and fisheries exist only inasmuch as human beings consume animal products. Animal agriculture only exists when people eat chickens, cattle, pigs, turkeys, eggs, yogurt, cheese, and so on. Fisheries only exist when people eat tuna, salmon, pollack, sardines, shrimp, lobsters, octopus, and so on. Similarly, sport hunting only continues because the larger culture accepts hunting as a legitimate form of recreation, *largely because hunted animals are ultimately consumed*, and acquiring food in this way tends to be viewed as an acceptable enterprise. It is empowering to recognize the complete dependence of animal agriculture, fisheries, and hunting on human dietary choices and on our view of other animals as eatable. Animal agriculture, fisheries, and hunting exist due to human consumption patterns, and their continued existence depends wholly on continuing these consumption patterns. Collectively, our consumption patterns determine whether or not this approach to other animals continues or fades into history.

## Why Focus on the Environment?

The Irishman and I have stayed in touch across time and miles. We occasionally get together to go hiking, and to continue working out ongoing disagreements (animal ethics, environment, and religion are still our favorite subjects, though they are now much less points of disagreement than topics of ongoing exploration). The Irishman's recent "eureka moment" has brought home the connection between dietary choice and environmental degradation for both of us. Whether you are a mainstream environmentalist, an active member of the Earth Liberation Front, an ecofeminist, or a deep ecologist, if you care about the health of this planet or the future of humanity, and if you have access to a variety of affordable food alternatives, this book is for you.