Six Arguments for a Greener Diet: How a More Plant-Based Diet Could Save Your Health and the Environment


Dr. Jacobson’s book presents a well-researched case for Americans to pursue a diet embracing increased plant intake and decreased consumption of factory-farmed meat. His book does not simply promote a vegetarian/vegan diet with the standard arguments of enhanced longevity and improved function of certain organ systems; rather, the approach is more holistic, delineating benefits for soil, water, and air quality, and also advantages to animals. This work is not a technical, university-level textbook; rather, it is best used as a survey of the issue, written in bright layman’s language for the benefit of an educated readership.

The first chapter, “Less Chronic Disease and Better Overall Health,” presents the potential health hazards of a typical American meat-based diet, and goes on to argue the health benefits of greater plant consumption. Data from studies with Seventh-Day Adventists and vegetarians, and many other published studies, are cited. Chapter 2, “Less Foodborne Illness,” characterizes human diseases linked to microorganisms encountered in factory-farming practices. A discussion is included describing how the U.S. food production and distribution system increases certain food safety risks. Other useful topics include how pathogens are spread from manure application, and the heavy dependence of factory farming on antibiotics. Chapter 3, “Better Soil,” discusses the adverse impacts of livestock on soil and land resources, including erosion and compaction. The effects of soil inputs in intensive agriculture, including fertilizers, heavy metals, biosolids, and pesticides, are presented. Chapter 4, “More and Cleaner Water,” briefly outlines the consumption of water involved in meat production including groundwater depletion and losses of irrigation water. Hazards of manure lagoons and the effects of fertilizers, manure, antibiotics, and pesticides on aquatic life are presented. In Chapter 5, “Cleaner Air,” a discussion of numerous air pollutants associated with factory farms is presented, including ammonia, methane, several N oxides, hydrogen sulfide, VOCs, particulate matter, and pesticides. Chapter 6, “Less Animal Suffering,” provides a disturbing description of the living conditions of factory-farmed animals. Topics address living quarters (cattle, pigs, chickens); efforts to enhance production (dairy cattle, chicken); development of neurotic behaviors in animals; issues with transport; and how animals are slaughtered. A brief discussion of hazards to workers at slaughterhouses is included. “Making Change” serves as a capstone to the book and provides suggestions for improving the American diet. Also included is a section on the importance of changing government policies, for example, to increase fruit and vegetable consumption; reduce the fat content of meat and milk; label food more effectively; prevent foodborne diseases; and limit antibiotic resistance. The appendix provides a brief review of foodborne pathogens and a list of relevant Internet resources.

The bias of this work is obvious at the outset; however, each chapter is meticulously researched and provided with an extensive list of published sources. Each chapter is rich with tables of data, figures, and photographs. Inclusion of side boxes within chapters provides a more detailed synopsis of a specific issue. Excellent-quality photos (all color) occur throughout, which enhance the quality of this work. The book is well-written and an easy read; the quality of the science holds the reader’s attention. My only serious regret with the book is that it was not longer; many practical and interesting topics could have been greatly elaborated on.

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