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Before you sink your teeth into that burger ...

By DAVID BOYD

Thursday, April 8, 2004 - Page A19

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These appear to be tough times for meat-eaters in Canada: ostracized by popular movies like *Babe*, *Chicken Run*, and *The Meatrix* (a cult Internet hit); lambasted in the bestselling book *Fast Food Nation*; fearful of mad-cow disease, avian flu and

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Yes

No

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Yet meat continues to be a fixture at almost every meal in Canada. Individual Canadians eat about 100 kilograms of meat a year, twice as much as the global average. That works out to 275 grams a day (equal to three good-sized burger patties), three times higher than the level recommended by the World Cancer Research Fund.

From a health perspective, eating meat is associated with health problems that are widespread in Canada: heart disease, stroke, obesity, cancer and diabetes. Nutritionists and mothers are right: We should eat more vegetables, fruits and legumes. An added benefit of eating less meat would be less strain on our medical system.

In recent decades, small-scale farm operations have given way to industrial livestock operations, also known as factory farms. In Canada between 1961 and 1996, the average number of animals per farm rose dramatically: cows, 147 per cent; chickens, 1,610 per cent; and hogs, a mind-boggling 2,451 per cent.

Canadian livestock operations produce 132 billion kilograms of manure annually, equal to 4,000 kilograms per Canadian. In Ontario and Quebec alone, livestock produce a volume of manure equal to the sewage from 100 million people. While manure can be used beneficially as a natural fertilizer, it can also contaminate water with nitrate, phosphorous and coliform bacteria. Between 1988 and 1998, there were 274 manure spills in Ontario, including 53 spills that killed fish. Although Canada spends billions of dollars to treat human sewage, far greater volumes of animal manure receive no treatment at all.

Ontario's environment commissioner concluded "environmental laws created when small operations were the norm may not address the associated environmental risks that come with more intensive farm operations."

Many people are aware of the world's growing water crisis but few recognize the connection between meat and water. It takes about 40,000 litres of water to produce a kilogram of beef, 6,000 to produce a kilogram of pork, and 3,500 to produce a kilogram of chicken. Far less water is required to grow grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables.

We can't simply replace red meat with fish either. The human quest for animal protein is devastating the Earth's oceans. Globally, the volume of wild fish caught has increased almost 500 per cent in the past 50 years. As a result, 70 per cent of the world's fisheries face serious difficulties as a result of overfishing. Pre-eminent fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly examined 45 years of United Nations data on species from around the world, and concluded that the "continuation of present trends will lead to widespread fisheries collapses" and, ultimately, the breakdown of ecosystems. Nor is fish farming a panacea, as it relies on a kind of protein pyramid scheme whereby wild fish are caught and ground into feed for distant fish farms, an environmentally reckless and grossly inefficient system.

The good news amid all this doom and gloom is that there is a simple solution to the myriad problems caused by meat consumption: Eat less meat! A healthier diet for both people and the planet involves dining lower on the food chain and only eating meat that is raised responsibly -- that is, organic or free range. There's no need for everybody to become vegetarian, but we'd all be better off if meat consumption declined.

David R. Boyd is an environmental lawyer, professor and author of Unnatural Law: Rethinking Canadian Environmental Law and Policy. Although raised in Alberta on a steady diet of beef, he is now a vegetarian.

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