

Diet for an Imperiled Planet

Last December, Maryland Sen. Jamie Raskin awoke from a nap to take a call from a reporter asking what people can do to help the environment. Influenced by books such as *Fast Food Nation* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, the first-term Democratic legislator had a simple answer: Give up meat for a week.

Animal advocates seized the moment and persuaded the mayor and city council of Takoma Park, Md., to launch Takoma Park Veg Week. Still a meat eater at the time, Raskin took a pledge to practice what he'd preached. Already sympathetic to vegetarianism, Raskin "just needed a practical and fun way to give it a try," he wrote on a blog chronicling the week's events.

Raskin isn't the first public official to inspire collective dietary change on behalf of the planet. Last year, Cincinnati's mayor and council members called on residents to eat less meat as part of a climate action plan. Earlier this year, the city of Ghent, Belgium, declared a weekly "Veggedag," a day when all residents are encouraged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by eating meat-free meals. A similar initiative, Vegetarian Mondays, is taking root throughout England, Australia, and Israel—further proof that people would rather give up meat than give up on the environment.

For Raskin's part, the pledge to go veg didn't end in April. "I just couldn't think of a single reason to go back," he says. In this excerpted interview with associate editor Andy MacAlpine, Raskin speaks about his newfound commitment to meat-free living.



Q: How have you adjusted to being a vegetarian?

RASKIN: I don't think it takes that much willpower to eat good food that doesn't include meat. The hard part is to overcome all of the stereotypes and stigmas that we impose on vegetarianism: A macho guy is a guy who eats a 16-ounce steak and hamburgers every night. So I've tried to turn that around on my friends and tell them that the macho thing is to figure out how to live without meat.



Jamie Raskin

Q: What are some of the benefits you've experienced?

RASKIN: I was feeling a lot more energy after meals, and I like the fact that I was beginning to see meat for what it really is. We like to dress meat up as cute things like chicken nuggets and Big Macs. But becoming a vegetarian forces you to remember what it is you are actually eating. And I don't know what the future holds, but I am very happy as a vegetarian now, and I do feel as if I have better aligned my meals with my morality.

Q: What do you mean by that?

RASKIN: In Maryland, we have a terrible problem with the contamination of the Chesapeake Bay and all of our waterways. The poultry industry in Maryland is a major contributor to the toxic pollution of the Chesapeake Bay. As a legislator, I am doing whatever I can to try

to rescue the bay from death by agricultural and industrial runoff and pollution.

But we are talking about a very dirty business, and it's not easy. As long as Chicken McNuggets are a huge part of our diet, there's only so much that government can do. We have been trying for decades now to reverse the contamination of the Chesapeake Bay, and now most of the bay is a biological dead zone. So I hope and trust that we will find legislative answers, but it is a race against time. Governmental policy and civic action have to go hand in hand.

Q: What is your impression of the state of animal agriculture in this country?

RASKIN: Billions of dollars go every year [to] agricultural subsidies, and we cannot continue to pretend that there is not a profound politics to the food we eat and the diet that we pursue. The public campaigns that The Humane Society and other groups have engaged in are very effective in terms of raising consciousness and also changing public policy. In general, the American public needs to reclaim ownership over our own diets. We cannot hand this off to big agricultural corporations who have their own interests in feeding us corn syrup and processed meat products.

Q: Do you think more people should give vegetarianism a try?

RASKIN: I have been encouraging the organizers who got to me to take this nationwide next year. So much of the challenge in politics is to overcome constrained ways of thinking about things. Doing this has opened up my mind to what is possible.