HUMANE SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE:

BY DR. MICHAEL W. FOX

The most pervasive way in which people harm the animal kingdom and endanger its future is not widely recognized as such. If it were, perhaps it would be halted. Its consequences are harmful not only to those now living but also to those in future generations. It is not trophy or sport hunting or wearing animal furs. It is not taking part in bullfights or dogfights or testing industrial or commercial products. It is not conducting biomedical-research experiments on live animals.

It is rather the maintaining and managing of critical resources—the land, forests, rivers, and oceans that provide us with meat, eggs, dairy products, and seafood. The manner in which we allow others to treat farm animals, displace and exterminate wildlife—from wolves and bears to songbirds and eagles—poison the land (and the food we eat) with pesticides, pollute the oceans, and scour the seas with vast nets for what little is left of marine life is part of this exploitation.

It is not widely recognized that what we buy at the grocery store and put into our mouths has more ramifications for the natural world—the environment and the animal kingdom it sustains—than anything else we do. Just as food has been used as an effective political weapon for centuries, so it can have profound political and socioeconomic consequences in the modern world. Americans have the luxury of choice in the food marketplace and the responsibility to choose wisely and compassionately.

The widespread lack of recognition of how consumer habits and farming practices affect the animal kingdom can be attributed in part to the fact that the majority of the consumer populace is either urban or divorced from the raising, catching, harvesting, killing, processing, or preparing of its own food. As we have become disenfranchised or displaced from these practices, our power to influence how they are carried out is greatly diminished.

These food sources (especially farm animals) and these resources (especially the land and the oceans) are being treated with little respect or reverence other than that which is materialistic and political.

As a veterinarian, I asked myself several years ago, what can I do professionally to help reduce, alleviate, and prevent this harm to the animal kingdom? What can I do for farm animals and wildlife species that are displaced, persecuted, and exterminated by most agricultural livestock and land-management practices of developed and less-developed nations alike?

My convictions move me to help reduce, alleviate, and prevent the harm being done to the animal kingdom and to the people indigenous to all sustainable biotic communities of pastoral, agrarian, or more ancient gatherer-hunter/hunter-cultivator traditions. The action I have chosen is very simple: to reduce my daily consumption of animal fat and protein and encourage others to do the same. Produce from humbly raised farm animals, as well as equally nutritious alternatives of plant origin produced by organic and other sustainable-agricultural practices, are becoming increasingly available to conscientious shoppers. Supporting those farmers who practice alternative, humane, and sustainable agricultural practices, rather than those who are allied with the conventional agricultural system, will hasten the day when products raised using humane, sustainable agriculture husbandry will be readily available.*

With the support of consumers, the much-needed revolution in American agriculture will be won. Rural communities can be revitalized by an urban populace that exercises its power responsibly both in the marketplace and in the voting booth.

By participating in this revolution—and by consuming less animal protein and fat (ideally coming only from food animals that are part of an equitable, humane, and sustainable agriculture)—we can do more to help the animal kingdom than by any other single act. In the process we benefit from a healthier diet. Conscientious farmers who still follow the land ethic of responsible stewardship and humane husbandry benefit as well. Without our support, such farmers would soon become extinct, along with what little is left of the natural world.

*Humane sustainable agriculture (HSA) produces adequate amounts of safe, wholesome food in a manner that is ecologically sound, economically viable, equitable, and humane. HSA meets farm animals' basic physical and behavioral requirements for health and well-being through a food and agricultural system that respects all of nature—humans, soil, water, plants, and animals, wild as well as domestic. (Statement drafted October 6, 1990, by the Humane Sustainable Agriculture Advisory Board)

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