

Wednesday, June 25, 2008

### **Why the death penalty for whales, cows, chickens, and lobsters?**

Of Greenpeace, the hunted, and the hunters. Previously, I avoided getting on a vegetarian soapbox. However, I modified that to blogging on the topic while minimizing saying anything to a dining companion who eats steak (even though I am deeply pained by the slaughter of the cow that is killed for the steak, and even when, like last night, the multiple steak eaters are otherwise compassionate fellow criminal defense lawyers), unless I am responding to taunting for being a vegetarian. I have become more vocal against slaughtering animals for food and clothing -- and against testing them for such unnecessary purposes as cosmetics safety (by the way, is it not more reliable to test a medicine or cosmetic on a human rather than a non-human mammal with a different chromosomal and overall biological setup, and is there any practical or moral justification to do any vivisection at all?) -- because, at its heart, I am deeply pained by the rampant mistreatment of animals that is so rampant that too many ordinarily compassionate people are numbed to the cruelty; I am fed up with the meat industry's meat-promoting happy face; and I am convinced that each person who stops eating meat will experience dramatically better health and will contribute to lower food prices and reduced health care costs and health insurance costs, and will contribute to an improved environment and a society where fewer humans will wreak violence against other humans and non-human animals. The International Whaling Commission has been meeting in Chile, where apparently talk is the talk of the day, rather than much action, other than Chile's commendable declaration this week -- apparently a reaffirmation -- that the nation bans whale slaughter.

Why stop at protecting whales against slaughter? Do people focus so much against whaling in order to prevent the extinction of at-risk whale species? Or, do people also oppose whaling based on whales being so highly intelligent and loveable? If the latter holds true, why draw the line at whales? Intelligence is witnessed in many other mammals, too, including the dolphins that get caught up fatally in tuna-catching nets. Why draw the line at mammals, then? Do birds not display high intelligence, for instance in finding their way to a specific warm location in the winter, and back to a specific location in the summer? Why draw the line at birds? Do fish not share many of the same qualities as humans? They have hearts, livers, kidneys, brains, and gonads. Is it okay, then, to eat shellfish, which do not flap around in desperation when removed from the water? The typical way to cook lobsters and crabs is to burn them alive; what did they do to deserve that? Many anti-vegetarians then ask: Why draw the line at land and sea animals? Why not just stop eating all plants and animals, thus leaving nothing else to eat? Few people are going to allow themselves to die for such a theory. Of course, I recognize that even if it is assumed that plants feel no pain nor awareness at being alive and being killed, insects are killed in the process of raising and harvesting plant food, and, as a vegetarian, I do not believe in eating insects, either. My best answer, then, is for food consumption to be focused on a harm reduction approach, so as to reduce the harm not only to the living things being killed for human food consumption, but also to reduce mistreatment of workers who ultimately bring food to the market, to reduce environmental degradation from food production (including fecal waste and methane/flatulence pollution from livestock), to reduce the harm caused by pesticides and chemical fertilizers and genetic plant modification, and to reverse the elimination of animal habitats that result from making way for livestock and growing fields. Protecting whales, then, is but an important start on the road to giving more protection to all land, air and water animals. Justifiably, much has been said and written about the possibility of no painless method for executing humans, let alone the mental torture involved in awaiting an inevitable execution. Why stop there? Why think for a moment that a dinner of animals is not the product of suffering during the animal's short life, suffering while seeing and feeling and hearing fellow animals being slaughtered, and knowing that this will be the witnessing animal's fate in just a few moments, and suffering at the moment of slaughter? I ask a favor to all meat eaters: Before you eat your next piece of meat, poultry or fish, please give a name to the animal from which this flesh came, whether it be Bob, Carole, Ted, Alice or anyone else. If you are eating a hamburger, sausage, or hot dog, it may be a good idea to give the meat several names, as hamburgers and sausages are a convenient way for the meat industry to gather up the scraps from the meatcutting machines. The more we give a name, face, heart, and soul to the humans and non-human animals upon whom we cause suffering, I am convinced we will reduce the suffering.

Jon Katz. ADDENDUM I: Back to whales, yesterday's Australian newspaper reports that "Japan says it is misunderstood, denies the 1000 whales it hunts each year for scientific purposes despite a 1986 moratorium are making it to the dinner table, and says it is also in favour of conservation." Either that is an untruth, or else the Japanese fish markets are obtaining whales for food some other way. As I wrote last January: "In 1999, a wonderful family living several miles from central Tokyo hosted me for a few days, which was a great way to experience how regular Japanese folks live. One morning, the son took me to Tokyo's equivalent of New York's South Street Seaport, teeming with wall-to-wall freshly-caught fish. Already a strict vegetarian, I hesitated about even going in the first place, but if this is the fate of countless fish -- I ate my huge share of fish and meat before becoming vegetarian -- I decided to witness part of that fate. "Not only were fish there. Several minutes into our tour of the huge building akin to an airplane hangar, I saw a multi-pound slab of whale corpse. My host confirmed it was what I thought it was, and I started feeling plenty more down than I already was around all the dead fish. Our host was at

once concerned about my feelings and hoping to reassure me that all was okay, that this is a deep-rooted part of Japanese culture to eat slaughtered whales." ADDENDUM II: Here are some of my past writings on vegetarianism and animal rights; Karma and your plate; How to reduce hunger and eating costs, and slash methane and fecal pollution? Of Greenpeace, the hunted, and the hunters. ADDENDUM III: Here are some links to Japanese government writings about whaling: - "We believe it is not appropriate to lightly condemn the behaviors of others as bad, barbarous or primitive, or rather there should be an attitude of respect for the cultures and habits of different cultures." - Whaling promoters have their own lobby, which is the World Council of Whalers. - The Japanese embassy in New Zealand proclaims: "Much has been learnt about the whales [from Japan's whale research program], for instance, it has been found that they consume three to five times the amount of marine living resources than are caught for human consumption. The research also showed that contaminant levels in Antarctic minke whales are very low." What justifies killing whales to obtain such statistics? ADDENDUM IV: Concerned about going hungry or unhealthy by trying vegetarianism and veganism? Now is the most convenient, healthful, and delicious time to eat vegetarian. It is hard to make the transition alone. Check out your nearby vegetarian society and PETA for an easier and more socially enjoyable way to reduce and eliminate meat consumption. Also, check out my vegetarian links.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 00:11

I'm a vegetarian too but mainly for environmental reasons - about 10x more grain is required to produce the same amount of calories through livestock as through direct grain consumption  
Anonymous on Jun 25 2008, 15:55

Thanks, Shalini, for your message. Interesting that an AVVO staffmember has taken time from the regular business day to write.

I wrote on this topic recently here <http://tinyurl.com/5xgvpf>.

Take care. Jon  
Anonymous on Jun 25 2008, 21:39