

Book review

Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture

"There are currently 1.28 billion cattle populating the earth. They take up nearly 24% of the land mass of the planet and consume enough grain to feed hundreds of millions of people. Their combined weight exceeds that of the human population of earth"

- Jacket summary from Beyond Beef.

by Jeremy Rifken Penguin Press, New York, 353 pp.

Reviewed by Roger Samson

This book shouldn't be passed over as it is well researched and its' thesis is sound: beef is an inefficient way to deliver protein and energy to people. The world has reached a plateau where, with 24% of the worlds land mass dedicated to "beef culture" and the human population and cattle population rising, something has to give.

The sad irony of the present situation is that while the poor nations of the world are starving their own populations to produce export beef, the beef buying rich are dying from the diseases of affluence (and our health care costs as a result are breaking the economy).

Rifkin has chapters on all of this, with titles ranging from "Cows Devour People", "Marbled Specks of Death" and my favourite title, "Hoofed Locusts". Overgrazing is a problem worldwide and it isn't only a problem with cattle. I remember driving down a road in Morocco and seeing six - yes, six - goats in a tree. There was no green vegetation left on the ground and, believe it or not, they were up there, with some sheep under the tree waiting for a few twigs to drop.

By and large, this book is not so much an indictment of the culture of cattle, but of the human species; some of the quotes Rifkin has dug up bring this out to the full. One of the most effective is in the chapter, "The Great Bovine Switch," all about the slaughter of millions of buffalo in the years 1871-1874, which could be subtitled 'Shoot a Buffalo to Kill an Indian'. Here's this gem of a quote: "These men [the buffalo hunters] have done . . . more to settle the vexed Indian question than the entire regular army has done in the last thirty years. They are destroying the Indians' commissary; and it is a well-known fact that an army losing its base of supplies is placed at a great disadvantage. Send them powder and lead if you will; but for the sake of lasting peace let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffalo is exterminated. Then your prairies can be covered with speckled cattle

and the festive cowboy who follows the hunter as a second forerunner of an advanced civilization". Throughout the book, Rifken continues to divulge man as the exploiter, and cattle culture as the tool.

He also exposes some very disturbing points about beef culture and the American beef processing industry; consider these for example: the USDA and several of the giant meat packers are using a new inspection system called the Streamlined Inspection System (SIS), which virtually eliminates the role of the federal meat inspector in the examination of beef destined for interstate and foreign (Canadian) markets. With this system, less than 1% of the carcasses are examined by federal inspectors, whereas they used to examine every animal that came down the line. Rifken claims that in the interest of speeding up production, cutting costs, and improving profit margins, the American beef industry and the USDA have seriously undermined the safety and health of the nation's slaughterhouses.

Rifkin also contends that "beef is the most dangerous food for herbicide contamination and ranks third in insecticide contamination. Eighty percent of all herbicides in the U.S. are sprayed on corn and soybeans which are used primarily as feed for cattle and other livestock. When consumed by the animals, the pesticides accumulate in their bodies. The pesticides are then passed along to the consumer in the finished cuts of beef. Large feedlots have other sources of potential chemical contamination in beef including use of industrial sewage and oils in feedlot mixtures and aerial spraying of insecticides on feedlot cattle."

The author offers no sustainable alternative way to produce beef. He says basically eat organic beef or better yet, don't eat it all. However, by and large, cattle aren't destructive but the way in which they are reared and the scale to which they are reared is destructive. For example, cattle as a subsidiary component of a grain or potato farm can contribute to the sustainability of farming through: utilization of waste feeds and crop residues, and facilitates the growing of soil improving forages and cover crops.

The problem is that this is currently the exception rather than the rule. Much of the beef produced in the world is from relatively unproductive rangeland, downed rainforest, or from irrigated crops used for feedlot cattle. There is a great need for less resource consumptive beef production systems to be developed. In this regard, beef is like the automobile; some people will never be able to do without it, so you may as well reduce the damage as much as possible while looking for better alternatives.

At the end of the book, Rifken tries to write in a philosophical style after having force fed the reader with facts all along; he should have stayed with the facts, as this is the best part of his presentation. Today's reality is that the planet is burgeoning with people and cattle. Reducing beef consumption will reduce the load for the time being. However, excessive chowing down on beef is only a symptom of a greater problem: resource gluttony and population growth by humans. Homo Sapiens are the problem, cattle are the scapegoats.

Beginning with this startling and unsettling set of facts, Jeremy Rifken interweaves anthropology, history, sociology, economics and ecology in a brilliant and devastating examination of the cattle culture that has come to shape and warp our world.

The fascinating story he tells goes back to the beginning of civilization, when the belief in the mystical power of cattle and magical properties of beef first was born. He charts the age-old conflict between those who raised cattle and those who farmed the land- a conflict that drastically affected the course of Western history and culture. Rifken cuts through the myth of the cowboy to illumine the international intrigue, political give-aways, and sheer advice that transformed the great American frontier into a huge cattle breeding ground. Then, taking us from sprawling Chicago stockyards to the automated factory feedlots of the Iowa plains, he presents the most disturbing indictment of the beef industry since Upton Sinclair shocked the American public with the *Jungle* eighty-five years ago. Finally, he gives us a superb overview of the triumph of the beef mystique in America and the world- a triumph marked by the golden arches of McDonald's in cities as distant from each other as New York, Tokyo, and Moscow.

Above all, *Beyond Beef* adds up the cost of all this. It depicts the world in which the poorer peoples of the planet have been starved to support the beef addiction of a handful of wealthy nations. In Europe, the United States and Japan, this addiction has resulted in millions of deaths from heart attack, cancer and diabetes- the diseases of affluence. The book also describes the grim ecological effects of the cattle culture: rain forests burned, fertile plains turned into desert, and climate threatened by global warming.

Beyond Beef may well take away your appetite for beef, but it will stir your hunger for change- before its too late. This persuasive and passionate book is for the 1990's what *Silent Spring* was for an earlier decade - an urgent warning to everyone who cares about the fate of the earth.

Copyright © 1992 ***REAP Canada.***