

Hunger and the Environment, the Evils of Predatory Agribusiness

In ways hidden to most who live in meat-eating societies, modern agribusiness diverts grain (the staff of life) from human mouths on a scale that defies the imagination. Appalling statistics on the social and environmental costs of livestock agribusiness can be found in the reports of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and detailed in books like those of Frances Moore Lappe (*Diet For A Small Planet*) and Jeremy Rifkin (*Beyond Beef*). Considering that the statistics on American livestock grain waste must be multiplied to assess the global cost of such practices, the implications for the human hunger dilemma stagger the mind. Over 120 million metric tons of grain are completely wasted in American livestock production each year. Two-thirds of the grain exported from the United States goes to feed stock. Millions of acres of third-world land are used to produce feed for European livestock. This squandering of agricultural resources is a crime against humanity, nature, and God.

The ecological cost of such livestock production is incalculable. Let us recall a basic moral teaching rooted in the ascetical tradition of Catholicism. In that catechesis we learn that we share guilt in a sin if we stand by and acquiesce in it. On this principle of guilt by being accessory to another's sin, I cannot take seriously the commitment of any environmentalist who, knowing the social and environmental costs of livestock agribusiness, still continues to participate in this sin by choice. There are presently over one billion bred-for-slaughter animals on the earth. These are consuming vast amounts of food and fresh water, most of which is completely wasted in the metabolic process. Unless gluttonous humanity faces this issue of unnecessary animal breeding and sacrifice to the false gods of acquired taste, it shall literally eat the biosphere to death.

We worry about deforestation, pollution, and about fresh water supplies. Fossil-fuel burning has our attention, but if we go back to sources like Rifkin's book we see that nearly half the water used in the United States grows feed for cattle and other livestock. Lappe has said that the water used to produce ten pounds of steak could supply a family for a year. Annually, cattle in the United States produce nearly one billion tons of waste and total livestock waste accounts for twice the amount of pollutants as originate in all United States industrial sources. A standard 10,000 head feedlot produces nearly 500,000 pounds of manure in twenty-four hours. This equals the human waste equivalent of 110,000 people. Much of this ends up as runoff, polluting fresh water sources with dangerous nitrates and other chemicals. Feedlots are the source of more than half the