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Book Review

Green meat? Sustaining eaters, animals, and the planet.

Edited by Ryan M. Katz-Rosene and Sarah J. Martin
McGill-Queens University Press, 2020; 256 pages

Review by Rachel Mason

I have been a vegetarian since the last millennium, but my partner raises goats for milk and meat, so I am well aware of the tensions between those who think meat will destroy the planet and those who believe that grass-fed livestock can heal it (and of course those who prefer not to think about the issue at all). I was therefore delighted to come across "*Green Meat? Sustaining Eaters, Animals and the Planet*", a book that grew out of discussions at the annual meetings of various academic societies in 2016. Edited by Ryan M. Katz-Rosene and Sarah J. Martin, *Green Meat?* brings together a diverse collection of perspectives to explore the relationships between meat and the environment, while tackling the thorny question of whether and how meat can be part of a sustainable diet.

Helpfully, the Introduction sets up a framework of three approaches to sustainable meat: "Modernizing" (efficiency improvements through technology), "Replacing" (moving to alternative proteins), and "Restoring" (replacing industrial meat with socially, culturally, and ecologically sound systems). The contributions in the book mainly deal with the latter two categories, in particular the Restoring model. For example, in the Restoring vein, Ryan M. Katz-Rosene (academic and farmer) proposes that pasture-based livestock are far more climate-friendly than industrially-raised animals, while regenerative agriculture advocate Sheldon Frith argues that farmers' experience shows that holistic planned grazing is good for the environment, even if scientific evidence is scarce.

From my own perspective, a few chapters in *Green Meat?* stood out. First, Caitlin Scott's "Does Meat Belong in a Sustainable Diet" discusses who exactly is defining sustainable diets and creating the narratives surrounding them. Scott finds that much is being left to academics, civil society groups, and business, with governments playing a limited role so far. While alternative protein companies are quick to adopt research showing the detrimental environmental effects of meat, the meat industry is, of course, keen to construct counternarratives based on

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efficiency and nutrition, while grass-based producers attempt to distinguish their products from industrial meat. While *Green Meat?* aims to complicate the notion that meat is unsustainable, "eat less meat" is only one of a number of competing narratives (as witnessed by hashtags and slogans like #yes2meat, "it's not the cow it's the how", "less but better", and #wownocow). Scott's chapter—aided by Tony Weis's blistering critique in "Confronting Meatification" — provides an important reminder that, despite some anti-meat messaging, powerful forces are still pushing for consumption to be maintained or increased.

In "Eco-Carnivorism in Garden Hill First Nation", Shirley Thompson, Pepper Pritty, and Keshab Thapa take the reader to an isolated Indigenous community in northern Manitoba. In Garden Hill, many Indigenous people eat meat-heavy diets of moose, rabbit, beaver, fish, and other animals, as well as locally-raised poultry and vegetables. The authors argue that these traditional diets are socially and environmentally sustainable and might be economically sustainable under a system of regulation and subsidies that allowed Indigenous foods to fairly compete with imported, commercial products. Garden Hill is a clear demonstration that sustainable diets must be context-dependent and responsive to social and cultural needs, and the maps of the Garden Hill food- and water-sheds in this chapter paint an intriguing picture of how that might look in one particular situation.

Firmly in the realm of "replacing meat", Lenore Newman's "The Promise and Peril of 'Cultured Meat'" gives a lively account of recent developments in cellular agriculture (lab-grown animal products) and plant-based meats (animal-free meat analogues), noting that cellular agriculture has already been used for decades to produce insulin and rennet. In Newman's telling, these technologies hold the promise of eliminating animal suffering from the food system without requiring people to reduce or end their consumption of animal products (which, as is repeatedly stated elsewhere in the book, may be an unrealistic goal). The chapter outlines the many fascinating and unanswered social, ethical, and environmental questions surrounding the development of meat-replacement technology, and the reference list will be a valuable resource for those wishing to understand the arguments in more depth.

In "The Structural Constraints on Green Meat", Abra Brynne addresses some of the practical barriers to sustainable meat (assuming that sustainable equates to small-scale, local production). Having been part of a "meat team" that helped small-scale British Columbia (BC) abattoirs obtain licenses under a new set of standards and inspection requirements, Brynne recounts how these regulations led to the closure of many facilities that formerly catered to local livestock farmers. The chapter also puts these changes into the wider historical context of meat industry consolidation and the power of large processors. While those themes will be broadly familiar to many readers, Brynne's chapter gives a detailed and illuminating account of changes to BC's particular regulatory regime (brought about at least in part to allow large producers access to export markets) and how these changes affected the lives and livelihoods of smaller farmers and processors.

In the final chapter the editors do a good job of bringing together all these threads and attempting to chart a path forward. At the same time, *Green Meat?* raises as many questions as it

answers—and I mean that in a positive way. For instance, the book as a whole, and Alexandra Kenefick's chapter in particular, encourage us to think deeply about the "labour, time, resources, life, death" (p.144) that are involved in bringing meat to the table. So, how much of this should we expect from people outside the food movement, and how should we be talking about food issues with them? Another common thread is context-dependence; how do you create space for local solutions in a global food system dominated by powerful actors? These seem like good questions for further reflection.

However, despite its many useful interventions, there are two issues that I wish had been tackled in *Green Meat?* First, is the question of scale. While it is repeatedly acknowledged that we probably do need to eat less meat, the question of "how much can we have?" is not addressed in any meaningful sense. In fact, Gwendolyn Blue's chapter argues against global, quantitative approaches to meat and climate change, making the very valid point that this framing privileges certain perspectives and fails to consider geographical and cultural contexts. Although I agree that figuring out what makes sense in terms of both local social, cultural, and environmental conditions and, say, the global carbon cycle is extremely complicated in terms of both mathematics and power relations, it also seems extremely essential, and would have been a great subject for this book.

Second, there is a conspicuous absence of discussion related to the ethics of eating animals. The scope of treatment is confined to pointing out that economic realities have always required that "the value of animal products covered the cost of maintaining those animals" (p.244). Especially given that animal welfare and rights are barely a footnote in "conventional" sustainability analyses, addressing these conceptually and ethically fraught issues in this thoughtful collection would have been a welcome addition. Though, to be fair, no single book can tackle everything. These minor critiques aside, *Green Meat?* remains a worthwhile addition to the conversation about meat and sustainability.

Dr Rachel Mason is a research scientist at the University of Maryland where she works on changes in global nitrogen cycling and links between agriculture and the environment. This a distinct change of field for Rachel - after a PhD in astronomy, she spent several years as a scientist at some of the world's major observatories, before becoming increasingly preoccupied with the question of "How can we have good food, happy people and animals, and a healthy environment – preferably all at the same time?". As well as the biophysical underpinnings of sustainable agriculture, Rachel is fascinated by the ways in which we frame and debate issues in the food system.