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English Composition II

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Where's the Beef?: Ethics and the Beef Industry

Americans love their beef. Despite the high rate of its consumption, in recent years people in the United States have grown increasingly concerned about where their food comes from, how it is produced, and what environmental and health impacts result from its production. These concerns can be distilled into two ethical questions: is the treatment of cattle humane and is there a negative environmental impact of beef production? For many, the current methods of industrial beef production and consumption do not meet personal ethical or environmental standards. Therefore, for ethical and environmental reasons, people should limit their beef consumption.

The first ethical question to consider is the humane treatment of domesticated cattle. It has been demonstrated in multiple scientific studies that animals feel physical pain as well as emotional states such as fear (Grandin & Smith, 2004, para. 2). In Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), better known as "factory farms" due to their industrialized attitude toward cattle production, cattle are often confined to unnaturally small areas; fed a fattening, grain-based diet; and given a constant stream of antibiotics to help combat disease and infection. In his essay, "An Animal's Place," Michael Pollan (2002) states that beef cattle often live "standing ankle

Comment [SL1]: Hi Logan! This is a great title.

Comment [SL2]: It will help strengthen your opening sentence to include some sort of facts or statistics about beef consumption in America.

Comment [SL3]: Throughout your essay, you talk about more than just limiting the consumption of beef. How could you strengthen your Thesis Statement to connect all of those points?

deep in their own waste eating a diet that makes them sick" (para. 40). Pollan describes Americans' discomfort with this aspect of meat production and notes that they are removed from and uncomfortable with the physical and psychological aspects of killing animals for food. He simplifies the actions chosen by many Americans: "we either look away—or stop eating animals" (para. 32). This decision to look away has enabled companies to treat and slaughter their animals in ways that cause true suffering for the animals. If Americans want to continue to eat beef, alternative, ethical methods of cattle production must be considered.

The emphasis on a grain-based diet, and therefore a reliance on mono-cropping, also contributes to the inefficient use of available land. The vast majority of grain production (75-90% depending on whether corn or soy) goes to feeding animals rather than humans, and cattle alone account for a significant share. As a result, a majority of land available for agriculture also goes to producing livestock, whether actually housing the animals or growing grain to feed them (Lappé, 2010, p. 22). This inefficiency means that a disproportionate amount of agricultural, food, and monetary resources are poured into a type of cattle production which has been demonstrated to be inhumane and to have negative environmental consequences.

In addition to the inhumane treatment of animals, CAFOs also raise ethical questions in terms of the environmental impacts of industrial agriculture. Because cattle raised on factory farms are primarily "grain-fed," meaning that their diet largely consists of corn and/or soy rather than grass or other forage, huge amounts of grain are required to provide the necessary feed. This grain comes primarily from "monocropping," an agricultural practice that involves planting the same crop year after year in the same field. Although rotating crops to different fields each season helps to retain the natural balance of nutrients in the soil, mono-cropping is considered to be more efficient on an industrial scale, providing larger yields of grain even though it also

Comment [SL4]: Great use of sources! The transitions here could be a bit smoother and the connection between these ideas could be a bit more explicit.

Comment [SL5]: This is a great topic sentence.

Comment [SL6]: In terms of cohesion, you may want to look into how your paragraphs flow from one to the other. The content of your essay is great, but how could you structure it differently to make it even better?

requires the use of more chemical fertilizers to provide adequate nutrients for the plants. These chemicals can leach into the groundwater, polluting both the surrounding land and the water supply.

Comment [SL7]: This is a great paragraph, but it could be stronger with the use of sources supporting and reinforcing these ideas.

Other environmental issues include the amount of manure produced by factory farmed cattle. Traditionally, cattle graze a large area and distribute their waste accordingly. In contained situations such as CAFOs, however, animal waste builds up in a relatively small area and the runoff from rainstorms can potentially contaminate the groundwater (Sager, 2008, para. 7). Furthermore, because closely contained animals are more prone to disease, factory-farmed cattle are routinely treated with antibiotics, which can also leach into the local ground and water, potentially affecting humans. According to Brian Palmer (2010), "Based on some estimates, we spend more than $4 billion annually trying to clean up CAFO manure runoff. In addition, the long-term, low-dose antibiotics CAFOs give livestock can lead to antibiotic-resistant bacteria, further undermining our dwindling supply of useful medicines" (para. 12). The negative impacts of antibiotic runoff, manure contamination, fossil fuel use, and mono-cropping indicate that sourcing beef from CAFOs is neither an ethically responsible nor an environmentally sustainable decision.

Comment [SL8]: This is a good use of a signal phrase, but it would also be helpful to indicate what position Brian Palmer holds so that the audience can understand why his input is relevant. Is he a scientist? A farmer? A reporter?

An alternative to the grain-fed cattle raised in CAFOs is cattle which are allowed to range and forage for grass and other greenery as their primary form of nourishment. This "grass-fed" beef is, almost by definition, more humane than grain-fed beef because the animals are allowed to move freely and eat a more natural diet. There is also some evidence that grass-fed beef is healthier than grain-fed beef for the humans who consume it: it is higher in cancer fighting, vitamin-A producing beta-carotene; it is much lower in fat, including having half the saturated

fat as grain-fed beef; and it contains many more omega-3 fatty acids, conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which prevents cancer growth, and vitamin E, which prevents cancer as well as heart disease (Ruechel, 2006, p. 235). Due to the benefits of a grass-based diet, as well as the benefits of being raised in pastures rather than feedlots, grass-fed cattle themselves tend to be healthier. Taken altogether, grass-fed cattle production is better physically for both the cows and humans.

It is important to note that grass-fed does not inherently mean organic, which is a separate, legal category with its own requirements. It is possible to find grain-fed beef from cattle raised or slaughtered in inhumane conditions that is labeled "organic" because the cattle were fed organic grain, whereas grass-fed beef may come from cattle that have been raised on land that does not meet the requirements for organic labeling (Sager, 2008, paras.10-15). However, in a guide to raising grass-fed cattle, Julius Ruechel (2006), notes that "Raising [cattle] in a pasture reduces or even eliminates the use of toxic pharmaceutical pesticides to control parasites and all but eliminates residues of high doses of antibiotics used on cattle in feedlot conditions" (p. 236). Even though it may not always be organic, choosing grass-fed beef reduces or eliminates many of the environmental and ethical concerns raised by factory farming.

Comment [SL9]: I wasn't sure how the information in this paragraph was relevant, but you do a good job of demonstrating it here. You could make these links a bit clearer in the earlier parts of this paragraph.

Grass-fed beef also comes with some benefits to the environment. As noted earlier, most grain-fed beef relies on environmentally damaging mono-cropping. This problem is not an issue with grass-fed beef, which relies primarily on forage and does not require the same crop to be planted year after year. Further, if the grass-fed beef that one eats comes from local farms and ranches, it lessens the environmental impact, whereas the long-distance shipping required by factory farming practices consumes fossil fuels, which contribute to global warming. Lappé (2010) explains the massive effects that industrial food production has on the environment, noting that throughout the life cycle of production, processing, distribution, consumption, and

waste, our food chain may be responsible for as much as a third of the factors causing global climate change (p. 11). However, as Pollan (2002) argues by the end of his essay, farms which focus on traditional agricultural practices are both more humane and more environmentally friendly than CAFOs. Ultimately, food decisions should be made with an eye to sustainability and humane treatment, ethical stances that are both supported by local farms focused on sustainable diversity.

Despite grass-fed beef scoring better on an environmental impact level than grain-fed beef, it is still not perfect, a fact that highlights the problems of eating beef at all if one is concerned with environmental ethics. Most notably, to assuage Americans' rapacious appetites for beef, landowners in South America often clear cut rainforest in order to create grazing land. "The realities of the global market are a great temptation to many: Where land is cheap and the demand for grass-fed cattle is on the rise, the local economy may respond by cutting down a forest to create pasture or by planting grass where millet or rice has been grown" (Sager, 2008, para. 21). This practice has negative environmental impacts on the local landscape and the planet as a whole, since losing vast swathes of rainforest increases the amount of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere, contributing to ozone depletion. In their article for Science magazine, scholars Molly Brown and Christopher Funk (2008) examine how climate change will affect food security and find that people in the developing world are at particular risk for a lack of food due to climate change. Mono-cropping and mono-grazing practices, designed to snag American dollars in the short term and not to sustain the local population in the long term, will only exacerbate these effects (p. 580–81). Furthermore, the rise in the market for grass-fed beef has meant that much grass-fed beef is shipped to the U.S. from South America and Australia. Even if these animals are raised in a humane and sustainable manner, the long distances they travel to

Comment [SL10]: This is a very good introduction to the counter-arguments.

reach American bellies has significant, negative environmental impact, again due to the use of fossil fuels (Sager, 2008, para. 21). This reinforces the importance of buying beef which has been locally produced, reducing the impact of long-distance shipping and potential mono-grazing in other countries.

No matter how ethically sourced, one can still identify some serious ethical problems with the raising and slaughter of beef, and those ethical quandaries are passed on to consumers. While grass-fed beef is clearly an ethical improvement over grain-fed beef in terms of humane treatment and potentially in terms of environmental impact, "No matter how you slice it, eating beef will never be the greenest thing you do in a day. Scientists at Japan's National Institute of Livestock and Grassland Science estimate that producing 1 kilogram of beef emits more greenhouse gas than driving 155 miles" (Palmer, 2010, para. 2). A kilogram of beef is about the equivalent of two generously sized rib-eye steaks. Multiply this by the amount of beef consumed by Americans in a year and the impact of these greenhouse gasses cannot be ignored. However, as compelling as this argument is, it is not reasonable to expect that Americans will stop eating beef altogether. In the short term, Americans need to eat humanely raised, locally sourced, grass-fed beef, which will ultimately lessen the ethical and environmental consequences.

Comment [SL11]: Excellent. I like that you have two paragraphs addressing the counter-arguments, one focused on environment and one focused on ethics. This parallels your discussion nicely.

Comment [SL12]: How could you change the wording to make it less dismissive of the counter-arguments?

If consumers are truly concerned about the ethical treatment of animals and the environmental impact of agricultural production, then the logical action is to stop eating meat altogether. If Americans are not willing to do this, then the next best action is to focus on humanely raised, locally sourced, grass-fed beef, while acknowledging that this may affect our beef consumption at many levels. Pollan (2002) concludes his essay by acknowledging that more humane treatment of animals would likely cause higher prices and lower consumption. However, he states, "maybe when we did eat animals, we'd eat them with the consciousness, ceremony and

respect they deserve" (para. 82). This emphasis on the respect for and well-being of the animals cultivated for food benefits both the animals and the consumer, acknowledging the desire to be true omnivores while satisfying our need for ethical clarity.

Comment [SL13]: Very good concluding statement!

References

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Reflection Questions:

1. **Provide one example of a place where you have used rhetorical appeals or source material to support your argument. How does this enhance your essay? (2-3 sentences)**

   One place I was able to use source material throughout my essay, but I think the part where I included the statistic about how producing 1 kilogram of beef emits more greenhouse gas than driving 155 miles. This helps enhance my essay because it puts the information into perspective for the reader in terms of how much the production of meat can affect our environment.

2. **Touchstone 4 is a revision of this draft. What kind of feedback would be helpful for you as you revise? Are there parts of your draft that you're uncertain of? (3-4 sentences)**

   I think a fresh set of eyes will certainly be beneficial to ensure I come up with the best draft possible. Sometimes, I can "get in my own head" about my writing and am not able to see the big picture as easily. An objective critique of the essay is going to be much appreciated and will help me immensely.

Research Essay Draft Rubric and Feedback

Rubric Category	***Feedback***	***Score*** ***(acceptable, needs improvement etc.)***
Argument Development and Support	Your thesis statement takes a specific position on one side of a debatable issue. Try to focus it a bit more by adding a bit more detail to it. The details you provide are primarily relevant and support your main idea. You consistently use logical reasoning and source material to support your argument effectively throughout your essay.	***34/40***
Research	You reference a number of credible, outside sources effectively, using quotation, paraphrase, and summary. You primarily incorporate these sources smoothly into your discussion. You could fine-tune some of your signal-phrasing in your next draft. There is a good balance between original writing and outside sources.	***25/30***
Organization	You have a great start on the organization of your paper. You have a thesis, an adequate number of paragraphs with topic sentences, and you address counterarguments. You also have an effective concluding paragraph. Look a bit more closely at the organization of your paragraphs (see notes in body of essay) to enhance this even more.	***13/15***
Style	You do a great job with your word choices and sentence structures.	***4/5***
Conventions	There are few – if any – negligible errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, formatting, and usage.	***5/5***
Reflection	You demonstrate thoughtful reflections, and consistently include insights, observations, and examples in your responses.	***5/5***
		Overall Score and Feedback: 86/100