



**THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER**  
**JOHN IKERD**

**Indigenous wisdom and  
 the sovereignty to eat meat**

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**G**rowing concerns about global climate change have rekindled an age-old controversy about eating meat (Carrington, 2018). Animal agriculture is frequently indicted as a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. However, animal agriculture is not without defenders, including those who claim that holistically managed livestock grazing systems could actually “reverse climate change” (Savory, 2013). Various studies suggest that the

environmental impacts of food animal production differ significantly among management systems—particularly confinement versus pasture-based systems (Koneswaran & Nierenberg, 2008). Due to its complexity, this controversy will not likely be resolved by science. Instead, the wisdom of Indigenous peoples may prove more useful in deciding whether to eat or not eat meat.

The Indigenous peoples of North America were not of a single mind or custom in their reli-

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*Why an **Economic Pamphleteer**? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. I spent the first half of my academic career as a free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. During the farm financial crisis of the 1980s, I became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn't working and wasn't going to work in the future—not for farmers, rural communities, consumers, or society in general. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark the needed revolution in economic thinking.*

ance on other animals for their food. Those living in the eastern part of what is now the United States relied more on plants for food—particularly the “three sisters,” corn, beans, and squash (Laws, 1994). They domesticated and cultivated corn, as well as other crops; corn remained their staple food source. Wildlife provided only a secondary source of sustenance. Indigenous peoples of the western plains, where the climate was less amenable to crop production, relied more on animals for food, particularly the buffalo. Fish and wildlife were major components of diets in northern regions of the continent, where crops were difficult or impossible to grow.

The role of animals in the Native American and First Nation diet increased significantly after Europeans brought horses and then guns to North America. Horses allowed the tribes on the Great Plains to hunt buffalo more effectively, reducing their reliance on the gathering of native plants. Guns increased the efficiency of hunting both large and small game among all tribes, reducing their reliance on farming and native crops. Even though meat may have been a major part of the diet of most Native Americans for only a couple hundred years, they apparently had no reluctance to include meat in their diets wherever and whenever it was practical for them to do so.

The Indigenous people of North America apparently were of a common mind regarding their fundamental relationship to other living and nonliving things of the earth. The natural world or environment was not viewed as separate or separable entities but as a whole that included humans and the other animals. As intelligent, thoughtful beings, they felt a moral responsibility to respect and care for the other elements of the natural world—including other animals. Many indigenous people believed and continue to believe that animals have spirits and that animals give their bodies to provide food, fur, and other materials for humans. The taking of an animal’s life was and is a sacred act (Indigenous Corporate Training, Inc., 2016).

Native Americans were also careful and respectful of the natural lifecycles of the animals with whom they shared the earth. They adopted customs to prevent overfishing, overhunting, and

overharvesting. They hunted, fished, and collected what was needed to sustain their families, tribes, or clans—but no more. Every part of the animal was used, and in many cultures there were accompanying celebrations and rituals of appreciation. The killing of animals beyond the need for food was practiced only by the few who adopted European values and killed animals to sell or trade. A prime example of European economic influence is the fate of the American buffalo.

Today, the ecological philosophy of Indigenous people is perhaps best preserved in the concept of food sovereignty. The global food sovereignty movement was initiated in the mid-1990s by Via Campesina, a *peasant-led* organization, bringing together small-scale farmers, farmworkers, women farmers, and indigenous people to resist agricultural industrialization. Food sovereignty was defined as the “people’s right to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Carney, 2012). The global food sovereignty movement suggests that the question of eating meat is matter of personal choice or at least should be culturally and locally determined.

The Indigenous Food Systems Network defines food sovereignty in similar terms. Relying on “Indigenous food related knowledge, values and wisdom built up over thousands of years” (Indigenous Food System Network, n.d., para. 2), Indigenous food sovereignty is defined by four key principles: (1) Sacred or divine sovereignty—Food is a gift from the Creator, and the right to food is sacred; (2) Participatory—Active involvement in cultural harvesting strategies; (3) Self-determination—Meet individual needs for culturally adapted foods; (4) Policy—Reconcile Indigenous food values with laws and the mainstream economy. Obviously, killing and eating animals is a part of many Indigenous cultures. Killing animals and eating meat would then seem to be a sacred right that is left to the discretion of individual tribal cultures or to self-determination.

This Indigenous wisdom of eating meat is also consistent with the requisites of sustainable agriculture. Agricultural sustainability depends on efficient, resilient, regenerative living agri-food

systems. In *efficient* agroecosystems, living species consume the secretions, embryos, or dead carcasses of other living species, turning redundancy and wastes into life-giving food. Animal species add *resilience* to agroecosystems, increasing their ability to endure shocks and disruptions—such as climate change. Animals also play a vital role in cycles by which solar energy is sequestered, cycled, and recycled by animals and plants, *regenerating* the diversity of life essential for efficiency, resilience, and sustainability. Every healthy natural ecosystem includes species that perform the basic functions of animals in a sustainable agroecosystem.

Sustainable agroecosystems, like Indigenous cultures, are individualistic and site-specific. The diversity of living organisms needed to sustain life and sustenance in one geographical and cultural ecosystem may be quite different from the diversity needed in another. Thus, the role of animal agriculture may be quite different, and of greater or lesser importance, in different sustainable agroecosystems. In some agroecosystems, species other than

animals may provide the diversity essential for sustainability. Basing individual decisions to eat or not eat meat on sustainability, food sovereignty, or Indigenous wisdom leads to much the same conclusions.

The food choices confronting North Americans today are quite different from those that confronted Indigenous peoples in the past. Today, animals are confined, abused, and slaughtered with little apparent concerns for their life or spirit. If all life is connected, what is done to any life is done to the whole of life, including human life. Respect for human life then requires respect for all life, plants as well as animals—every life. Killing should never become comfortable, because all life is sacred. Life requires taking of life or taking from life, but life does not require irreverence or disrespect for the life taken—any life. Meeting the challenges of climate change, food sovereignty, and sustainability will require a renewed respect for life. Whether that includes eating meat will remain a matter of culture, conscience, and personal choice. 

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