

15 January 2015  
**Are We What We Eat?**

This is surely the least diplomatic of questions to be asking in this season of double chocolate fudge brownies and whipped cream enhanced eggnog. Perhaps the question can be useful as we hop on the scales and then rewrite our New Year's resolutions.

Back when I was growing up (don't ask) we were told that indeed we were only as healthy as the food we ate. The discussion has widened over the decades and now in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century we are told that what we eat may not merely harm us but actually harm the planet we live on. Our first reaction of course is to compare one average person to this big blue ball, and retort, "You must be kidding!"

In all sorts of publications one finds lists of things selected by one expert or another the use of which should be avoided to prevent damage to one facet or another of the ecosystems that sustain life. Among the edibles that have the ability to affect the food chain and therefore the planet is bluefin tuna, a delicious component of the menu in your favorite sushi bar. This species has a long life span and so when over-fished it does not have the ability to come back. If it declines further, it is gone! Concerned for this severely depleted fish, scientists urge we order vegetarian sushi.

Again, we hear about beef. The sustainability officer of Central European University says, "Cheap burgers environmental assassins!" Factory farmed beef means that tropical forests are replaced with cow-food fields of pesticide-laced corn and soybeans. Would we not love our burgers even more if they were a once a week treat?

Palm oil consumption comes upon us unaware. Unless we take a magnifying glass shopping and read all the fine print, we do not know we are consuming palm oil. This 'food' is another culprit in the destruction of the rainforest. Its use has ballooned by 500% since 2004 and it has sneaked into about half of all packaged food. Palm trees need a tropical climate so it is the forests of Indonesia and Malaysia that have been lost, about 8 million acres burned and cleared. It is not just the loss of plant and animal species including potential pharmaceutical discoveries, but the loss of the climate-moderating effect of the forest itself that is a disaster.

The deforestation process results in carbon emissions, a pollution that actually surpasses the yearly amount of pollution caused by all US cars, trucks, planes, and shops. Some of the foods to avoid include store bought cookies, crackers, and instant noodle soups. When time allows, home cooking tastes best but a little time reading the ingredients list on packaged food may help you find some brands that do not use palm oil. We do have to admit, however, that close reading of those lists often results in an acute loss of appetite.

Poor corn: this comfort food has been earning a lot of bad press for decades. It is not the corn itself that is the enemy, but the way it is grown and processed that puts it on those lists of things to avoid. The problems generated by the growing of corn include destroying habitats, depleting soils, polluting air and water and contaminating native corn varieties. Corn grown as a monocrop has put the bee population at risk. As with any crop grown singly in huge swathes it therefore requires the overuse of pesticides to control insects designed for that crop. Overuse of pesticides has resulted in the creation of superpests, which in turn require ever more dangerous poisons. A crowning indignity is the production of high-fructose corn syrup. Sigh – read the labels!

To avoid caffeine I have reluctantly stopped drinking real coffee and hereby declare there is absolutely no substitute for that heavenly elixir. If you are still luxuriating in a daily cup of

coffee, make sure your beans are shade grown. The manipulations of the genes( so that coffee will grow in sun) has resulted in the use of gigantic quantities of pesticides, fertilizers, herbicides, fungicides. As our brother's keeper, we are aware that when monocultures for export are introduced into a struggling country, the subsistence farms are lost and the people suffer. Since all of us eat, all of us need to pay attention to what is on our plates.

If you have a spot of sunshine on your property, a mere 10' x 10', you can have a garden. The catalogs are coming: time to plot for healthy eating.