

Choices Matter

This column began with a banana: it was wearing a small round green and white sticker that read, “Rainforest Alliance Certified”. In translation that means no rainforests were cleared for the plantation that was the home of that particular banana. Gardeners and most homeowners know what a difference trees make to the microclimate of their own property. Multiply that effect and we introduce ourselves to the power of the rain- forest in affecting climate.

Decades ago grade school students were taught a subject requiring a huge flat book, the map-rich geography book! Names of countries and their discoverers, their capitals, their mountain ranges and rivers, imports and exports – all were memorized. Of course quantities of those ‘facts’ were altered after World War II when the empire-drawn margins dissolved into strange new places.

One ‘fact’ remained true, the importance of the rainforest. Beyond its role in regulating climate and the value of those millions of acres of old growth trees with their richness of plant and animal diversity, there is new recognition of the critical importance of those forests’ ability to sequester fossil fuel emitting CO₂s.

Concern about the dangers inherent in the loss of rainforests is appearing in all sorts of publications. One such discussion occurred in Jane Jacobs’ “The Nature of Economies”, a book written in the form of Platonic dialogue. [‘Dialogue’ is a lovely word. It may become extinct as it means speaking and listening among compatriots, not ranting and raving in a my-way-or-the-highway fashion.]

A lesson from that book is the reminder that a rainforest is an ecosystem that is a reservoir of energy flow that is passed around, converted, cycled, and recycled. When the land is cleared the soil bakes and hardens, the rains wash out nutrients and after a few years the land is hardly worth planting. And that vital energy is lost for ever.

In many areas of the world once the trees are cleared it is just a matter of time before the land is claimed by desert. Recently I read that a piece of virgin rainforest as large as 36 football fields was being destroyed every minute of every day. Since 1960 one quarter of Central America’s forests have been removed to make way for cattle ranches with the beef exported to Europe and the US.

The explosive population growth is one factor, but another is the change over the past few decades in our eating habits. For example, Costa Rico used to be a model for the wealth of plant and animal species in its rainforest, but today, not only is the majority of the forest gone, the fertile cropland is devoted to raising hamburger beef. As our eating habits have changed, what was once a family Sunday treat, has become a daily expectation. You could say that we are eating more of everything, but it is the beef consumption that is damaging our food system in the long run.

A recent study shows that raising beef requires 28 times more land to produce than pork or chicken and 11 times more water. Another stark statistic is that 70% of all US grain feeds livestock, not people. Exacerbating the situation is that legislative absurdity requiring even more corn to be used for fuel each year, when there is no real energy saving!

There was an article in the Christian Science Monitor about the balancing act between producing enough food for the ever-expanding world population and the share of greenhouse gases resulting from that production. The president of Food Tank, a Chicago-based think tank

focused on food security is quoted: “Cutting down on how much meat consumers eat every day has an impact on not just food availability, but also personal health, and agriculture’s environmental footprint.”

One study found diet, especially meat consumption, caused more greenhouse gases than transportation or smokestack industries. Reference to a study in the journal Science stated that using farmland to feed people instead of animals and gas tanks would provide 70% more calories, feeding four billion people.

Common sense prevents us from expecting everyone to jump on the vegan bandwagon, or even to expect everyone to declare hamburgers off the menu. However, surely the least we can do is to reduce our habitual consumption of beef and fill the gap with wonderful fruits and vegetables from our own gardens and local farm stands.

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