

Student Essay for Behavioral Change Project

Environmental Studies 303: Human Ecology and Sustainability

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Introduction

My goal, for the next week, is to reduce my meat consumption by thirty percent. I have chosen this behavior of eating meat on a near daily basis because it has been identified, through thoughtful discussion with peers, family members and trusted advisors, to be one of the most unsustainable practices I undergo and one in which, by its reduction, I can most greatly reduce my footprint on this planet. I have already committed to many “first tier” sustainable practices such as; increased energy efficiency in my home, recycling/composting, use of public transit, increased support of local sustainable agriculture etc. Therefore, I have taken this opportunity to push myself to explore more challenging behavior modification by reducing my consumption of an energy intensive source of calories-meat.

The goal of reducing my footprint is important to me because I have been convinced that it is my social and environmental responsibility, as a learned individual, to actively participate in careful and thoughtful analysis of my impact on our planet and to apply that analysis to making better decisions about how I conduct myself. Although I do not expect to have a zero footprint, I do believe that through mindful decision making I can be an example for my peers, my community and future generations. I believe that our current environmental crisis is largely a result of our cultural views about our relationship with our natural environment and the necessary psychic shift required for a more sustainable world will require generations of cognitive behavioral change. Consequently, I hope to be, not a pioneer, but instead be an agent of this physic shift so that future generations will have a more solid foundation on to which they might further their environmental stewardship.

Baseline behavior

My baseline meat consumption was monitored over a period of one week. During this period, I made no changes to my diet and recorded my meat consumption habits. In an attempt to establish a system by which I might recognize patters, I created a chart to log variables that seemed appropriate to my eating habits. These independent variables were; Day of the Week, Meal (i.e. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner), Location of Meal (Home/Out)¹, Source of meal Preparation (Home/Other)². The dependent variable was the amount of meat consumed in ounces after being

¹ “Out” refers to meals eaten in any other location than home. During the work week, lunch was always consumed in the campus cafeteria.

² “Other” refers to meals in which the primary preparation was outside of the home kitchen. For example, pizza eaten at home would be labeled as “Other”.

cooked. The amount of meat was approximated using nutrition labels when available or consulting with others to determine a reasonable value. The source and type of meat was not considered because of my broadly diverse meat consumption and, therefore, to narrow the behavior challenge. Additionally, only meat products were counted. Animal products such as milk, eggs, and cheese were not part of my behavior modification challenge.

After careful analysis of my baseline behavior, I decided to eliminate meat from lunch entirely. Not choosing meat for lunch should adequately reduce my consumption and meet my goal of a 30 percent.

Of the 49.5oz of meat consumed during the eight day monitoring period, 47% (23.5oz) of it was during lunch and 100% of the lunches that I consumed meat were in the campus cafeteria. Dinner accounted for 46% (23oz) and breakfast for less than 7% (3oz). Dinners that were prepared outside the kitchen accounted for 33% of my meat consumed during dinner and 67% of my dinner meat consumption was prepared at home. The only breakfast I ate during the monitoring period (1oz) was prepared and consumed at home.

I have noticed several factors that influence when I eat meat. The first and most important factor is perceived choice. At school my choices are reduced to what is in the cafeteria. While there are vegetarian options, they are substantially fewer. Additionally, at home I do not prepare my meals and I eat what my wife make cooks. The meal in which I feel I have the most choice is at breakfast (which I usually prepare for myself) and lunches during the weekend.

Personal taste preference also plays a crucial role of when I eat meat. For example, in the cafeteria, nonmeat options are usually dull and unimaginative and typically consist of salad and soup while many of the “tastier” entrees contain meat. One day the lunch staff served an entrée with tofu instead of chicken and I did not feel that I missed the meat. When “tasty” meet-free food is an option, I will often choose it

Attempted Changed Behavior

After eight days of implementing my new regime I ate only 15oz of meat-a 70% (fig. 1) reduction in consumption compared to the previous eight day monitoring period. All of the meat was eaten during dinner and every dinner was prepared at home. As stated above, I chose only non-meat options when eating in the school cafeteria. However, many of my dinners over the same period did not contain meat. This was not for any formal decision but was a result of typical eating patterns at home.

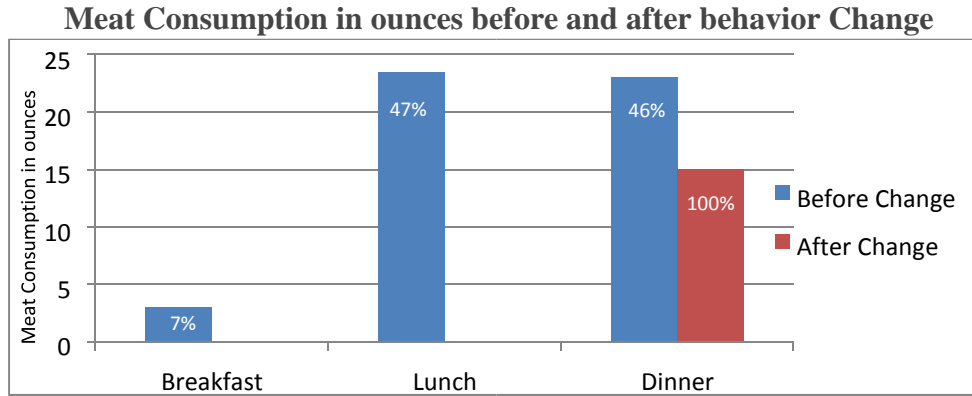


Figure 1

Reflection

Despite the qualitative success of my behavior change, I do not think that the numbers accurately reflect how much meat I actually eat. In fact, I think that if I was to track my meat consumption over a much longer term I would find I eat considerable more meat per day than determined by this project. Nevertheless, I did find it a valuable experience to examine the factors that contribute to my choice to eat meat. By being mindful about my food choices and giving some thought as to why it is I choose to eat meat I can cognitively change my behavior over the long term. And this, I believe, is the crux of issue. It is a tall order to change deeply engrained and culturally supported habits on a personal level and, even more so, on a cultural level. However, being aware of the choices we make and the effects they have can have lasting impacts on how we conduct ourselves and, in turn, effect social change. Although significant changes in social views may take generations, we, as individuals have the agency to contribute to the advancement of these changes by the choices we make. In this light I formally commit to make the following changes to my meat consumption:

1. I will give serious consideration to alternative options to meat when available.
2. When I choose to eat meat I will choose a smaller portion.
3. When purchasing meat, I will make an effort support local, low impact farmers.

I cannot envision myself as a full-time vegetarian but I can envision myself eating considerably less meat and acquiring that meat from more responsible sources so that I can reduce my footprint just one more step.