

## **BIOPHILE FEB/MAR 2007**

I am a vegetarian. I am also an atheist and a feminist. But of the three philosophies which largely inform my thinking and determine my conduct, it is my decision not to eat wobbly-kneed calves and squint-eyed pigs which has got me into the most trouble. In fact, my allegiance to tofu has proved to be more of an incitement to argument and criticism than my allegiance to the likes of Richard Dawkins and Germaine Greer. Who would have believed it?

Certainly not me, when I turned veggie about 18 months ago. Well, nearly veggie – I've only recently stopped suffocating fish. As we all know, there are few so messianic as those who are newly converted, and if I hadn't been quite so vociferous in declaring my reasons for choosing a humane way of living, I might not have become the pariah I now am in some circles.

I make my living by speaking about my expeditions to audiences around the country, and the latest of these adventures was a long walk from Durban to the Victoria Falls in the footsteps of an ancestor of mine who got to 'The Smoke That Sounds' soon after David Livingstone. A couple of weeks before my journey's end, and in a remote area of Botswana, I came across some hunters. The mutilated head of an old bull elephant lay on a concrete slab at the back of their camp. On top of one of his magnificent dentures, buried amongst the mushy remains of his skull flesh, lay a sad and accusing eye. It seemed to symbolize everything the animal kingdom has suffered at the hands of a bunch of kill-clever apes who should know better. I was utterly outraged. And did I let the murderers know it! In between consuming vast quantities of their single-malt whisky and imported cheeses, I berated the men (if that's the right term) for the crime they had committed, cast aspersions on their manhood and slandered their Spanish nation.

But the following morning, hung-over and heart-sore, I found myself tucking into a bacon and egg breakfast in a desperate attempt to clear my head and fuel my limbs for another day's walk. That plate-full contained a revelation that was as inescapable as the bullet that had ripped through the cranium of the elephant – and it struck me with near-equal force. The pig I was chomping with such relish had, in all likelihood, suffered a more torturous end than its fellow pachyderm (and yes, believe it or not, they were once part of the same classification, both being ungulates that do not ruminate). The pig had also, most certainly, endured a worse life -

imprisoned in a factory farm and unable to move or socialize at will. I was a damned hypocrite, a nauseating urbanite who was prepared to rage against hunters while allowing others to confine and kill on my behalf.

Now there are few things I hate more than hypocrisy and animal abuse, and I had now been shown to be guilty of both. I had been roundly and soundly ‘outed’ as a bunny-hugger with a neat set of double standards.

And that’s where all the trouble began – with my telling anyone and everyone who’d listen about this Road to Damascus experience on the road through Botswana. Members of my audiences clucked in sympathy and outrage at the elephant’s demise, before being shown (in equally graphic detail) how their ‘hunting’ is done in the abattoirs of our country. And, not liking the message, some of them were galvanized to try and shoot the messenger.

My mail bag started to fill with missives from those who thought I needed bringing into line. “Man is the supreme carnivore,” wrote one Eastern Cape farmer, “and while I would not like the life of a battery pig or fowl, it is the only one they know. If we didn’t eat them, they wouldn’t have a life at all.” Huh? And how about this one from another meat merchant, motivated to look after his cattle well for no other reason than “because discontented animals are not profitable.” Now, I try not to journey through life with a moral abacus ever at the ready, but *really!* How does one respond to such staggering examples of illogical thinking and devil-may-care profiteering?

My tongue-in-cheek assertion that hunters must surely be poorly endowed in order to prove their manhood in such a way, really got under the (fore)skin of one old geezer, living near Prince Albert. He wrote to say that this was as a result of me suffering from “some sort of subconscious and deep seated repression or envy.” He ended his vomit-letter with a PS: “Yes, you are correct, I do have a small willie but it is still much bigger than yours!” How do you answer that?

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