

# **We Are More Alike Than You Think:**

How the vegetarian community can work together with environmentalists and animal activists to achieve more

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The logo for VegVibe, featuring the word "VegVibe" in a bold, green, sans-serif font. The "V" in "Veg" is significantly larger than the other letters, and the "Vibe" part is in a slightly smaller font size.

*VegVibe is the first print magazine in Singapore that discusses vegetarianism, veganism, health & nutrition, animal welfare, and environmentalism without using an in-your-face approach or religious slant. VegVibe presents the facts logically and allows readers to decide for themselves and arrive at their own conclusions, facilitating self-reflection and, consequently, more committed decisions. In addition VegVibe acts as a platform that unites groups across animal welfare, environmental and vegetarian/vegan movements.*

Once upon a time - during the 70's and 80's - the world saw environmentalists, animal activists and vegetarians as three separate groups, each with its own quirks, philosophies, directions and methods. In fact, the groups themselves viewed each other as distinct and different as could be. As Elliott Sober<sup>1</sup> observed in 1986, environmentalists saw each species as a whole entity and not as a collection of individual lives, whilst animal liberationists (a term used at that time) endeavoured to save the life of every sentient being. Thus, for example, the arrangement of having a population of deer protected by allowing for the hunting of a small number of them each season would be a perfectly logical solution to the environmentalist of the time and totally unacceptable to the animal liberationist.

Meanwhile, vegetarians were largely viewed as limited by religious doctrine and in a way forced into denying themselves the 'pleasure' of meat. They were viewed as victims of cultural practices and it was more the case that many such religious vegetarians experimented with eating meat and strayed away from their predestined lifestyle rather than the other way around. This theory is corroborated by observations that there was a decline in ethical vegetarianism during the eighteenth century<sup>2</sup>.

To say the overall movement was fragmented in the 70's is an understatement. But today, it is hard to view environmentalists and animal activists as 'very different'. It is now a case of each group having a different area of specialisation - just like a professional footballer and a professional basketball player are both high-performance athletes. Today's activists are more

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<sup>1</sup> Elliott Sober (1986). Philosophical problems for environmentalism. In B. G. Norton, editor, *The Preservation of Species: The Value of Biological Diversity* (p. 173–194). Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

<sup>2</sup> Kerry S. Walters and Lisa Portmess (ed.) (1999). *Ethical vegetarianism: from Pythagoras to Peter Singer* (p.47). New York: State University of New York Press.

certain of their philosophies and whilst there might still be differences in the specifics, the broader objectives remain largely aligned.

### ***Today's Movement***

It seems that the utilitarian approach<sup>3</sup> proposed by the influential Peter Singer - where the objective is to bring as much good as possible to as many as possible - has become the fundamental concept from which efforts are undertaken for any activist. We see animal groups trying to improve the general welfare across species whilst adding additional focus to help individual cases. We see environmentalists pushing for everyone to individually do even the littlest that they can because they recognise that every minute act contributes to the larger overall impact.

In the wider context, taking responsibility for the environment and other sentient beings is no longer the prerogative of the eccentric few. Today, almost everyone is mindful of doing their part to ensure that the Earth is sustainable and the animals are not unduly inconvenienced. Many people set aside their used consumables for recycling<sup>4</sup>; many choose adopting from shelters or picking up strays rather than buying their pets<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Oppenheimer (2002). Who Lives? Who Dies? The Utility of Peter Singer. *The Christian Century* (p.24-29).

<sup>4</sup> Earth911.com (2010). *2009 Annual Recycling Search Report* - <http://static.earth911.com/annual-report/Earth911-Annual-Report-2009.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Associated Press (2010). *Poll: Most prefer pets from shelters* - <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/37106782>

This is largely due to a more educated world populace<sup>6</sup> that has a higher level of understanding and appreciation of the urgency for action. This has translated into continued exposure on media platforms and more significant importance when discussed<sup>7</sup>.

### ***Vegetarian Community in the Grand Scheme of Things***

And where the general public is on the same page with environmentalists and animal activists<sup>8</sup>, the vegetarian/vegan community will naturally be that much more informed. This is supported by clinical studies - in one, the animal empathy of 72 vegetarians was compared against 67 non-vegetarians and it found that 'vegetarian males had significantly higher empathy and significantly more positive attitudes toward pets compared with non-vegetarian males'<sup>9</sup>.

Most vegetarians today have chosen this lifestyle consciously due to ethical considerations rather than religious doctrine<sup>10</sup> and this makes this community more sensitive to the pertinent issues raised by environmentalists and animal welfare activists. This common thread in the philosophy of the current crop of vegetarians - even religious vegetarians are becoming more committed after learning about animal cruelty - enables them to be readily rallied for various parallel causes.

From VegVibe magazine's firsthand experience in Singapore, we similarly notice that the vegetarian community is more responsive to issues revolving around the environment and animal

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<sup>6</sup> Saint Kitts & Nevis (2010). Country Review (p.90).

<sup>7</sup> John Thøgersen (2006). Media Attention and the Market for 'Green' Consumer Products. *Business Strategy & the Environment* 15(3) (p.145-156).

<sup>8</sup> Todd Cohen (2008). Environmental awareness fuels support. *Philanthropy Journal* - <http://www.philanthropyjournal.org/nc/ncnews/environmental-awareness-fuels-support>

<sup>9</sup> Brooke Preylo and Hiroko Arikawa (2008). Comparison of vegetarians and non-vegetarians on pet attitude and empathy. *Anthrozoös* 21.4 (p.387-395).

<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Hamilton (2000). Eating Ethically: 'Spiritual' and 'Quasi-religious' Aspects of Vegetarianism. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 15(1) (p.65-83)

welfare. When events are organised or initiatives begun, it is the vegetarian and vegan community that comes forward to offer overwhelming support. When financial support is needed, this community gives more readily and more consistently as compared to the general public.

But many animal activists are not vegetarian and many in fact do not see the need to reflect their care towards animals in their dietary preferences. Sometimes, they don't quite see the hypocrisy of feeling so upset over the dog that is tied all day with not an inch to move but having no qualms about supporting an industry that does the very same thing to chickens. They don't see the parallels between cats that are declawed to chicks which are debeaked.

Environmentalists see less of a similarity with vegetarians - they believe they care for the environment while vegetarians are concerned about animal killing. In some ways, they may be right but the fact remains that knowingly or unknowingly, vegetarians have been doing more for the environment than the environmentalists themselves all these years<sup>11</sup>. The UN's FAO in 2006 quantified this fact in its report, *Livestock's Long Shadow*, which reported that the livestock industry causes more harmful gases (18% of greenhouse gases) to be released into the atmosphere than all the cars on earth put together<sup>12</sup>.

Thankfully, this oversight by animal activists and environmentalists is changing rapidly and we are seeing more people from these groups turning to vegetarianism and veganism as a holistic approach in realising their personal philosophies.

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<sup>11</sup> *Vegetarianism and the Environment*, PETA website - <http://www.peta.org/issues/Animals-Used-for-Food/vegetarianism-and-the-environment.aspx>

<sup>12</sup> Food & Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (2006). *Livestock's Long Shadow*, (p.112).

### *Scope for Improvement*

Nevertheless, these groups continue to largely work only within their respective communities to generate ideas and plan initiatives, and only start engaging other stakeholders at the end stages - typically, when they are publicising the event or programme and need participants (i.e. when they need the crowd numbers). In initiatives that involve lobbying for change in policies or action by governmental agencies, it is almost-always a 'within-group' project.

For example, the unique date of 10th October 2010 (i.e. 10-10-10) has seen an overwhelming surge of events. The 350.org movement is organising a Global Work Party<sup>13</sup>, while the 10:10 movement is organising a day of action to cut carbon emissions with the slogan, "10 per cent at a time"<sup>14</sup>. There is an even a World Zombie Day gathering planned<sup>15</sup>. In Singapore, we have Ground-Up Initiative's Balik Kampung @ Bottle Tree Park, which aims to be "a day of fun-filled carnival to share the joy of doing work while having fun as we create actions to reduce carbon emission through how we live, eat and play"<sup>16</sup>.

While this event's aims include "bringing together multiple organisations"<sup>17</sup>, those that have been brought on are largely fellow environmental groups such as ECO Singapore, Green Drinks Singapore, Nature Society (Singapore) and Water Watch Singapore<sup>18</sup>. Animal welfare groups have not been engaged as closely, nor has the vegetarian community - although vegetarian eateries have been roped in, being the lowest common denominator of dietary preferences.

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<sup>13</sup> *The 10-Step Plan for your Work Party* - <http://www.350.org/10steps>

<sup>14</sup> *About 10:10* - <http://www.1010global.org/uk/about>

<sup>15</sup> *Crawl of the Dead* - [http://www.crawlofthedead.com/crawls/info/world\\_zombie\\_day\\_london\\_outbreak\\_2010/](http://www.crawlofthedead.com/crawls/info/world_zombie_day_london_outbreak_2010/)

<sup>16</sup> *Balik Kampung @ Bottle Tree Park* - <http://carnival-bottletreepark.blogspot.com/>

<sup>17</sup> *Why Celebrate?* - <http://carnival-bottletreepark.blogspot.com/p/testing.html>

<sup>18</sup> *Participating Organisations* - <http://carnival-bottletreepark.blogspot.com/p/participating.html>

It must be noted that it is highly unlikely that animal welfare groups and the vegetarian community have not been wilfully excluded - in fact, VegVibe had received the press invite for a sneak preview of the garden on 30th September 2010 - and the invitations to the event have been circulated to vegetarians, vegans and animal lovers alike, as well as to the general public. The notable absence of vegetarian proponents and animal activists during the organising stage of this event is due to the existing mindset - as mentioned earlier. The initiating party, Ground-Up Initiative, as well as the animal groups and other groups catering to the vegetarian community do not feel there is anything concrete to gain from collaboration and hence do not even consider the option, let alone explore any possibility.

### ***Evolution of Society***

This where a paradigm shift is most necessary; without adequate and constant consideration of active opportunities across the various groups, useful collaboration will not be secured - or will not be as frequent as it could be. On the world stage, we have seen the various movements achieve incredible traction with the business community and inroads in creating awareness among the general public.

The next stage would be to consolidate and streamline the thrust of making positive impact. Animal activists, environmentalists and the health conscious need to be seated at the discussion table of all initiatives by default. It is only by repeatedly working together over time can efficient ways of consolidating the needs, objectives and resources of all parties be operationalised.

And this is where VegVibe plays a critical role. By engaging the independent movements separately and establishing strong relationships, we have been able to facilitate opportunities for

different groups to meet and engage one another across movements. For instance, at the VegVibe print launch in August 2010<sup>19</sup>, a total of 102 guests from 10 environmental groups, 8 animal groups, 12 businesses and the general vegetarian community were pooled together in a networking session.

Almost all the participants found the session a fruitful experience and several partnerships were made - evidenced by the session extending beyond the allotted time. Many expressed that the experience enabled them to have a better appreciation of the other movements and identify overlapping areas that could be explored for collaboration.

We are thus confident that converging the various movements can only further their individual objectives - the whole can, and will, be greater than the sum of its parts. VegVibe is committed to facilitating this process by creating regular opportunities for the groups across movements to come together and form relationships. To date, we are the first and only entity to offer such a uniting platform and we hope to transplant this concept and practice to other areas around the world in time to come.

### ***The Art of Coming Together***

The main advantages of the animal welfare, environmental and vegetarian/vegan movement coming together include more exposure for each movement's work to the others. When the animal activist shares on the work that his group has done, the environmentalist learns in detail what has been happening rather than have a general idea. Naturally, this dialogue would also foster better understanding between the actors of the various movements.

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<sup>19</sup> Gangasudhan (2010). *Welcome Address by Managing Editor of VegVibe magazine at print edition launch event.*

But more importantly, in the long run, the resources available to the various groups can be pooled together and better utilised so that programmes can be executed with efficiency. Work can be divided more appropriately and specialisations can be tapped more accurately. Imagine using PETA's creative mettle to launch a campaign<sup>20</sup> together with ActionAid<sup>21</sup> and World Rainforest Movement<sup>22</sup> against both factory farming and unsustainable agricultural farming.

Not to mention, the biggest advantage of all will be the ability to better convince the business community to come onboard as partners for major initiatives. Presently, each group approaches various business entities for individual initiatives in the hopes for a one-time collaboration whilst a few of the better-managed groups have managed to establish medium to long term relationships with the business community.

If the various movements consolidated into a major force, it would then be possible to set up a universal fund for major projects that blends together with a holistic approach. A one-stop point for businesses would consequently result in a snowball effect where more businesses come onboard.

A spin-off advantage of centralising business involvement would be the identification of those that practice greenwashing - where facts are withheld and manipulated to seem pro-green when they are not in reality<sup>23</sup>. For instance, if a business were to claim to the environmental groups that it was replanting trees in an effort to reduce its carbon footprint, the animal welfare groups would be alert to the practice of removing natural habitats and the animals occupying these

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<sup>20</sup> *Controversial PETA Ads* - [http://www.asianoffbeat.com/profiles/PETA-Ad-Campaigns\\_16\\_1](http://www.asianoffbeat.com/profiles/PETA-Ad-Campaigns_16_1)

<sup>21</sup> *ActionAid* - <http://www.actionaid.org/eu/index.aspx?PageID=3956>

<sup>22</sup> *World Rainforest Movement* - <http://www.wrm.org.uy/deforestation/indirect.html>

<sup>23</sup> *The Seven Sins of Greenwashing* - <http://sinsofgreenwashing.org/>

habitats for this purpose. In this way, the level of involvement and sincerity can be monitored more comprehensively and concerted pressure can be applied to ensure rigour and compliance within the business community.

### ***The Art of Working Together***

While VegVibe is working towards establishing relationships across the movements, we have nevertheless identified a handful of opportunities where a consolidated approach may yield results. In October 2009, as part of the International Day of Climate Action celebrations, an aerial photograph followed by a walkathon and a joint-exhibition was organised by a consortium of activists<sup>24</sup>. Namely, the Vegetarian Society (Singapore), Environmental Challenge Organisation Singapore and Animal Concerns Research and Education Society came together to plan and execute the event successfully.

Over 300 people from all walks of life supported the event with their physical presence and involvement. While this may have been a simple-enough initiative with universal appeal to organise, it nevertheless demonstrates the potential for such cross-collaboration and illustrates its practicability.

Moving forward, the annual Earth Hour can be a central point for movements to collaborate as it is already a widely accepted event and many individuals are keen to get involved. Perhaps a larger scale event can be organised where animal welfare groups can arrange for pet owners (with their pets) or sheltered animals can participated in a meaningful activity. Perhaps,

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<sup>24</sup> *International Day of Climate Action (Singapore)* - <http://www.350sg.com/>

environmental groups can provide the infrastructure to use eco-friendly resources for the activity with the vegetarian community and businesses coming forward as supporters and volunteers.

VegVibe conducted a survey recently on dietary trends<sup>25</sup> and the results provide some basis to the position that the public is more averse to animal cruelty than to animal killing. A sizeable proportion - 1 in 5 - of the survey respondents who were generally non-vegetarian indicated that they do not consume dairy (even though they consumed meat). One possibility that may explain this occurrence could be that those who are comfortable with a kill-to-eat paradigm are not comfortable with the cruelty involved in 'manufacturing' dairy.

We feel that this situation may present the opportunity for vegetarians and vegans who are concerned with the health and ethical aspects of dairy consumption (respectively), to join forces with the animal welfare movement which would be concerned with the actual suffering of the animals together with the environmental movement which would be highly concerned with the global impact of methane release, water pollution through waste, and land degradation through feedlots. Together, an awareness programme could be developed to encourage reducing dairy consumption.

### ***Conclusion***

There is little doubt that society as a whole is ready and ripe to experience a consolidated and holistic approach in tackling animal welfare, environmentalism and health. It is hoped that the justifications presented in this paper are convincing enough to spur animal welfare groups,

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<sup>25</sup> VegVibe (2010). *Survey Finds Dairy Consumption Declining in Singapore* (press release).

environmental organisations and bastions of the vegetarian and vegan community to actively network across movements and look towards evolving into a bigger entity.