

## Review Article

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### **Protecting Mea**t

Kip Andersen & Keegan Kuhn, (Writers, Directors, & Producers). *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret*. AUM films and First Spark Media. 2014. [www.cowspiracy.com](http://www.cowspiracy.com).



A cow's face stares at us on the DVD cover, and "cow" is in the name of the documentary, yet the marketing for *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* does not otherwise indicate that it is a film that animal rights and vegan advocates have special cause to celebrate. As a media scholar who falls in the latter two categories, I was pleased that this environmental documentary has much to offer the animal rights movement, as I will explain in this review.

The film is eponymously framed as a thriller about industry and environmentalists conspiring to keep a secret. For example, [cowspiracy.com](http://cowspiracy.com) calls it "the film that environmental organizations don't want you to see," and the DVD cover reads "there is one single industry destroying the planet more than any other. But environmental organizations don't want to address it." The back cover explains that the filmmaker investigates "why the leading environmental organizations are too afraid to talk about it."

One can guess by the title's reference to cows that the industry in question is animal agriculture; however, most of us are accustomed to environmental discussions of food typically restricting themselves to critiquing factory farming, while endorsing

locavorism, smaller-scale grass-fed or organic farming methods, and fishing of certain “sustainable” wild species, or some aquaculture methods (Bristow & Fitzgerald; Freeman, “Meat’s Place”; Stanescu). So *Cowspiracy* certainly could have been more of that same message promoting “sustainably-sourced animal products” or reduction in meat consumption, primarily based on environmental rationales. Surprisingly, it is not, and it comes to the conclusion that a plant-based diet is needed to feed a growing human population, not only based on sustainability concerns, but also because veganism is more compassionate toward individual nonhuman animals.

If the proposed point of the film is to uncover *why* the largest environmental NGOs are not talking about the destructiveness of meat and dairy, we do not ever exactly find out their rationales, at least not from the environmental groups interviewed. But others interviewed in the film surmise the environmental organizations are pragmatically catering to their (financial) supporters. For example, food journalist Michael Pollan proposed that being anti-meat would be “a political loser” for membership organizations who probably feel that challenging people on something that is so dear to them will hurt fundraising efforts.

A similar view is shared by some other experts (not featured in the film), such as Holt, who found that many environmental organizations shun anti-factory-farming coalitions with animal rights organizations, in order to avoid alienating their own members who hunt and farm animals. Likewise, I surmise that the two social movements’ fundamental disagreements over humans’ entitlement to hunt, fish, and farm nonhuman animals likely increases environmentalists’ reluctance to be associated with veganism, as the cause is heavily associated with the animal rights movement (see Freeman, *Framing Farming*). Motavalli has suggested that important food-oriented coalitions with environmentalists would be more likely, if animal rights activists became more “flexible” on the issue of eating animals, implying that it is the animal rights movement who needs to compromise its principles.<sup>1</sup> But research by Laestadius et al adds a more pragmatic rationale, arguing that food issues are often off-topic (or tangential) for environmental NGOs, as they are historically set up to focus more broadly on energy, forests, oceans, pollution and waste, and do not make a habit of pushing the *public* to make major (unpopular) lifestyle changes. Instead, environmental NGOs focus more on persuading *government and industry* to make policy-based and supply-side changes (hence, food campaigns tend to promote “sustainable farming and fishing”). To tackle this major, overlooked issue with meat, these researchers have recommended the creation of food-focused environmental NGOs. And, as a film,

Cowspiracy also drives home the urgent need for the environmental movement to prioritize the meat issue.

***Cowspiracy's Narrative Journey.*** The 1.5 hour film features young American environmental activist Kip Andersen as the host and narrator, and we follow him as he attempts to discuss the environmental impacts of the animal agribusiness and fishing industries with government agencies and major environmental advocacy groups (conspicuously, Greenpeace repeatedly refuses to talk to him). Andersen was motivated to do this by discovering that his “obsessive compulsive” efforts at biking and recycling were not making him sustainable, since he ate animal products, and they contributed the most to greenhouse gas emissions, habitat destruction, species extinction, ocean dead zones, and freshwater exploitation. He interrogates why governmental and environmental groups do not emphasize the destructiveness of animal farming and fishing, but does not get a satisfactory rationale from most of the environmental NGO leaders. An interview with the industry lobbying group Animal Agriculture Alliance then coincides (perhaps not coincidentally) with a cut in funding for his film, and a feeling that investigating the meat industry is risky, as it was for Howard Lyman, whom Andersen interviews about his experience being sued for libel along with Oprah Winfrey by Texas cattle ranchers. There is an implication that the meat industry is a bully who may even have the environmental movement in its pockets.

Nonhuman animals are visually featured the most when Andersen interviews animal rights activists, environmental scholars, and organic and free-range animal farmers, as he explores alternative animal agriculture models other than factory farming and commercial fishing. In the end, he is not convinced of their sustainability from a logical standpoint, nor is he convinced of their ethicality from an emotional standpoint, which becomes apparent as he (and presumably the audience) gets upset after seeing two ducks killed by a backyard farmer. Andersen ends by concluding that veganic (organic, all plant-based) agriculture is the most sustainable and humane food production model for a growing human population. He explores newer plant-based meat, egg, and dairy alternatives, and he himself transitions to eating a vegan diet, not just for sustainability and spirituality, but for “thriveability.”

**How does *Cowspiracy* Advance Animal Advocacy?** The first time the film acknowledges the nonhuman animal’s perspective is 14 minutes in, when Dr. Will Tuttle provides historical context for how humans and the domesticated animals we (re)produce now comprise an astounding 98% of the Earth’s biomass, crowding out the “free-roaming animals” who used to far outnumber us. Representatives from the following animal protection organizations are also interviewed later: Sea Shepherd

Conservation Society, Food Empowerment Project, Animal Place farmed-animal sanctuary, and American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign, as well as vegan activists like the “Mad Cowboy” Howard Lyman. Also, environmental researcher Dr. Richard Oppenlander appears many times in the film and provides some of the harshest critiques of how animal agribusiness kills wild animals and drives their extinctions.

Especially toward the end, the film overtly acknowledges the individuality, sentience, and desire to live of nonhuman animals, such as when we see the backyard farmer exercising his privilege to decide who lives and dies of the ducks raised in his small backyard. The camera sympathetically shows us the reaction of the duck who witnessed the first slaughter and is awaiting his similar fate, trapped in the hands of another man. Then comes the highlight of the film, from my perspective, when Andersen starts to cry after witnessing the two ducks getting their heads chopped off, noting that “when it gets to this point, it’s not even about sustainability anymore. It was just, uh, I don’t feel real good inside.” He admits that he had been doing what many environmentalists do, looking at everything/everyone abstractly in terms of numbers or effects on the overall group/system, rather than thinking of all of these animals as individuals; this echoes the classic debate between animal ethicists who want to privilege the individual and environmental ethicists who often want to privilege the species group (Regan).

When we viewers are weary (and perhaps weepy) after witnessing the two ducks being cut in half, and we think we now have to endure another slaughter scene, this time of a chicken, Andersen relieves us (and himself) by rescuing the chicken instead. The whole atmosphere of the film livens up as we see the chicken in the passenger seat, being petted by Andersen, who is driving her to a farmed animal sanctuary called Animal Place to live out her full life. As environmentalism tends to be masculine and *Cowspiracy* itself features more men than women, it is refreshing to see the male host be confident enough to buck traditional masculine roles of animal domination and abstract rationality to show the “sentimentality” and compassion for individuals that is typically associated more with femininity (Adams; Luke). As a society, we need more men to challenge these antiquated gender roles in favor of an androgynous ethic of care (and justice) toward fellow animals (Donovan & Adams). Poignantly, the backyard farmer explained that his dad made him kill rabbits when he was a kid and it was hard at first, and now we see him killing ducks in front of his own kids, so the legacy of raising and killing animals continues.

Farmers’ children also play a role in my second favorite scene, this one on Markegard Family Grass-Fed (free-range) farm. Their adolescent daughter Lea, shown petting a pig

in a woodsy area, tells Andersen, “Some people think that pigs are dirty and gross, but I really like them. They know people. They’ll be friends and be really nice. And they could be like your best friend or could be like a sister.” Another pig comes up to be petted. “See, they know you when you get to know them. Sigh. I mean I shouldn’t be bonding but you have to have nice pigs.” Andersen asked her “Why shouldn’t you bond with them?” and Lea answered: “Well because they are going to turn into bacon.” It seems that children more naturally want to bond with animals (be they pigs, rabbits, ducks) than kill them, but parents teach them that those species of animals ultimately exist for the purpose of supplying human food.

Case in point, we then see Lea’s mother, Daniga Markegard, with a human baby on her hip, matter-of-factly telling Andersen how many months old certain pigs are, and thus which pigs are old enough to be killed (ironically, I note that her baby may be the same age as those pigs). When Daniga says “those two smaller ones over there can grow up a few months,” and points at two pigs with her other two children (including Lea), we realize that by saying “those two smaller ones” she does not mean her two growing kids. Speciesism dictates that she means she can kill the young pigs — further emphasizing human dominance and control over the lives and deaths of nonhuman animals. That the Markegard parents go on to say how much they “love animals” ultimately seems odd to the audience, and potentially undermines the “humane meat” impression many viewers may have otherwise received from this free-range farm.

The film then moves on to the dairy industry, and I found it interesting that the representatives from this industry were more frank than their counterparts in the meat industry when it came to admitting the unsustainability and high inputs their farming methods require. Additionally, the editing and framing of the film footage during Andersen’s visit to the organic dairy farm will raise animal welfare concerns from the audience, for the cows and calves who were featured in muddy or mechanistic conditions, facing repeated family separations, and then eventual slaughter. The film’s producers are willing to undermine and challenge the claims of some animal agribusiness organizations, as when *Cowspiracy* shows sad factory farm images over an Animal Agriculture Alliance representative’s claims that the animals are better off in confined feeding operations.

I was glad that *Cowspiracy* avoided making certain environmental claims that would be counter-productive to an animal-rights cause. For example, the film did not propose a solution of “greening” the factory farm, nor any biotech solutions of engineering animals, or capturing greenhouse gas emissions from animal waste (Clark; Twine). And unlike the food campaigns of most environmental organizations (Freeman, “Meat’s

Place”), *Cowspiracy* calls for the major dietary changes that are actually ecologically necessary, not just what is palatable. The film does not assume that humans are unwilling or incapable of giving up eating animal products.

On the other hand, the film is not written with a conscious recognition of animal-rights or anti-speciesist language that humbly acknowledges that humans are also a member of the animal kingdom, nor does it always recognize the individuality of nonhumans by carefully using words like “he” or “she” not “it,” and “who” not “that” (Dunayer).

**Pedagogical Suggestions for Use of *Cowspiracy* in the Classroom.** Most guest presentations in school classrooms cannot accommodate the two hours it would ideally take to show the full documentary followed by discussion. To utilize *Cowspiracy* as a basis for a 60-75 minute discussion of environmental *and animal rights* issues with animal agribusiness, I recommend showing the following 40 minutes’ worth of clips from the film, interspersed with open discussions/Q&A:<sup>2</sup>

Topic of the Clip	Timing (Times are from the “first run release” version of the film.)	Specific Elements Featured
Problems with the fishing industry.	2 minutes 23:45 – 25:55	The oceans under siege; “bykill” deaths; driftnet damages; sharks killed in ‘sustainable fishing.’
Free range and organic farming of land animals and its costs to the environment, wildlife, and society.	17 minutes 41:15 – 57:30	Visit to Markegard free-range family-run ranch raising pigs and cows; high land use calculations of ranching; visit to organic dairy farm; calculations of high water usage in dairy industry; ‘wildlife management’ at the hands of ranching interests, specifically the killing of wild horses and wild predators in the West; David

		Simon on his book Meatonomics outlining how to internalize/raise the costs of meat and dairy; political power of animal agribusiness and their lobbying.
(Vegan) solutions for feeding a growing human population	20 minutes 1:04 – 1:23	Human overpopulation and inefficiency of humans eating animals; how meat contributes to world hunger; Michael Pollan recommending eating less meat and more plants; visit to a “backyard farmer” raising ducks (shows the killing of two ducks); Andersen’s emotional reaction to the ducks’ killing; calculations of ecological inefficiency of backyard animal farming; visit to Animal Place sanctuary when Andersen rescues a chicken and decides to go vegan; visits with veggie meat producers like Beyond Meat; Howard Lyman speaks on the vegan and environmental connection; Physician Michael Klaper discusses health benefits of a vegan diet; visits to organic and veganic crop farms and calculations of their efficiency in feeding people (compelling charts and stats); Will Tuttle provides a vegan vision.

The clips from the middle and later parts of the film that I have outlined above are the best ways to showcase how fishing and animal farming that might otherwise be presumed to be sustainable as well as “humane,” are still ethically and ecologically problematic in comparison with organic or veganic crop farming. While host Kip Andersen acknowledges some benefits that small-scale and free-range animal farming have over factory farming, his film ultimately dispels the myth that any animal farming is truly ecological. Showing these film clips allows the audience members to:

- learn about the plight of sea and land animals raised or killed for human food (even in the “best” conditions);
- make connections with certain individual cows, pigs, ducks, chickens, and aquatic animals;
- understand how wild/free-roaming animals are killed and displaced to cater to ranchers’ interests;
- consider the broader role of economics and politics in the maintenance of an ecologically destructive meat-based diet;
- understand that a plant-based diet can be a healthier alternative to a meat-and-dairy-based diet;
- acknowledge that eating organic plant-based foods is the most efficient and ecological way to adequately feed a growing human population, with the potential to save the lives of millions of under-nourished humans and billions of nonhuman-animals (both “wild” and domesticated).

## Notes

1. For comparison, I doubt that it would be socially acceptable to ask *human* rights activists to compromise their life-affirming principles (or principles of freedom, justice, health, welfare, etc.). Speciesist social norms allow for *nonhuman animals’* lives and freedoms to be routinely compromised in resolving any conflicts; thus, defending animal rights (such as veganism) is perceived as “unreasonably” absolutist and inflexible.

2. For help facilitating discussions that blend animal protection with nature/environmental protection, see Lisa Kimmerer’s anthology *Animals and the Environment: Advocacy, Activism, and the Quest for Common Ground* (Routledge, 2015).



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