



ASIA-PACIFIC

Are Pacific Islanders eating themselves to death?

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Mutton flaps are scraps of meat and bone taken from sheep, and can contain up to 50 per cent fat. The flaps are removed from higher-quality cuts of meat, with New Zealand a primary source. Whilst they account for about 10 per cent of a sheep's carcass, they represent only around 3 per cent of its market value, but should not be regarded as waste because capitalism can be remarkably efficient in extracting the last shred of value from a product. The meat industry and its industrial organisation was the initial inspiration for Henry Ford's production line and the ideology of Fordism. Recruiting the worker into the mass production process increases their capacity for consumption; in the case of cheap meat, the consumption feeds into moral quandaries about choice.

Fatty meat, offal and viscera are no longer popular components of the Australia and New Zealand diet; a rise in affluence has enabled our dietary habits to reflect our aspirations for better health. In the past these less valuable parts of slaughtered animals have been used for fertiliser, dog food, canned processed meat, soap making and industrial uses. In the last thirty years exporters have found markets in the Pacific where these meat products can be sold for slightly higher financial return, and flap meats are a central ingredient in the Islanders' favourite dish, chop suey. The consequence of this trade in 'cheap meat' is sky-rocketing rates of obesity and diabetes in Pacific Island states. Seven out of ten of the most obese nations on earth are in the Pacific. This is attributable to a diet high in fatty, highly-processed foodstuffs exported to the Pacific from Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America.

The implications for development are manifold as Pacific health budgets blow out to try and address this crisis. The legal and economic implications for this rise in non-communicable disease are serious. Fiji banned the importation of flap meats and similar off-cuts as an assertion of national sovereignty against unhealthy imports, and incurred the wrath of the WTO. Some health advocates have called for additional health warnings on unhealthy products being exported to these markets, on the argument that Pacific consumers are more vulnerable than others. The foreign revenue raised by selling meat to the Pacific is miniscule; the foreign aid budget for addressing Pacific health and nutrition is significant. Australia and New Zealand provide dialysis treatment here and in the Pacific for thousands of Islanders whose diabetes is likely linked to food sourced from our shores. As a good neighbour, Australia sends

nutritionists to the Pacific as aid workers, who tell the locals to eat less of what we sell them in the first place. Given that some Micronesians (particularly from Chuuk and Palau, but not from the more traditional Yap) are dying of heart attacks before they reach the age of 30, does Australia have to ask some ethical questions about its food exports to the Pacific?

When I was much younger, my father used to take me fishing off the phosphate wharves in Geelong. Billions of tonnes of phosphate were shipped from Nauru to Australia, and the product would then be processed into fertiliser to increase the productivity of Australian soils to grow wheat, beef and lamb for export. For bait we used mutton flaps. Our butcher assumed we fed it to our animals. My father's generation were probably the last non-Indigenous Australians to live — and then die — on a diet of highly-processed tinned foods; many of my father's friends died early from a diet high in fat, alcohol and tobacco. Health promotion, education and a rise in affluence have shifted dietary habits for most Australians.

Turkey tails are almost 100 per cent fat and they taste great fried. Exported from the USA, they were used in dog food until a market was found for them amongst the people of Polynesia and Micronesia. In the Pacific Islands, Indigenous peoples with access to the cash economy continue to make poor dietary choices, given both the health outcomes and the expense. 'Cheap meat' isn't even particularly cheap, although priced to be cheaper than traditional proteins such as fish. In Development Geography there is an assumption that the poorer and less 'developed' a country is, the worse its health outcomes will be. The opposite is often true in the Pacific. Research by anthropologist Kirk Huffman amongst the Tanna Islanders in outer Vanuatu, who live outside of economic globalisation and follow 'kastom', or traditional ways, shows they do not suffer the disease of their Pacific neighbours, and are said to be the happiest people on earth.¹ Elsewhere in the Pacific, Spam and corned beef are the number one prestige food products. These processed meat products are high in fats, salts and nitrates and made with low-grade meat. They are eaten in quantities sometimes approaching gluttonous, and are essential in symbolic gift-giving, bordering on potlatch, for weddings, funerals and birthdays. Frozen exports of flap meats and turkey tails are also becoming increasingly popular in these Pacific rituals.

Australians hold a range of misperceptions in relation to life in the Pacific. Vitamin-rich tropical fruits are fed to animals; village beaches are buried under the litter

REFERENCES

1. See, eg, Kirk Huffman, 'A palmy balm for the financial crisis', *Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney), 9 February 2009, <smh.com.au/news/opinion/a-palmy-balm-for-the-financial-crisis/2009/02/08/1234027847284.html> at 8 Nov 2010

of Spam and tuna tins. The cost of living in Pacific Island states can be extraordinarily expensive due to geographic isolation. Coupled with frequent natural disasters such as floods, tropical cyclones and drought this can disrupt food production and distribution; a few weeks ago a box of out-of-date Kellogg's cornflakes was seen on a shelf in Tonga priced at AU\$16. It can often be very difficult to farm successfully in the Pacific, due to climate and the gruelling nature of the work. Packaged, processed food from the West has largely supplanted indigenous food stuffs in those islands more integrated in the globalised capitalist economy. Nauru is a clear example. Once the second-richest nation, per capita, on earth because of its phosphate royalties, Nauruans developed a taste for imported frozen Australian food and ate themselves to the rank of the world's most obese people. It is a depressing irony that the food they over-ate was grown in Australia and fertilised with Nauruan phosphate. Now the phosphate has run out, Nauru is one of the poorest countries on earth but it still suffers the lifestyle-related diseases acquired through affluence and western contact. Today, Nauru's desalination plants are largely idle due to lack of funds for maintenance. With an unreliable fresh water supply, people often choose to drink sugary soft drinks. In a country that can experience severe droughts, lack of water means that agriculture is near impossible. Onions imported from Australia can cost \$2.00 each. It is easy to be appalled at the health crisis in the Pacific, but not so easy to avoid sanctimony. The lifestyle choices made by Islanders themselves are complex, borne of complex circumstances, and a solution that offers healthy outcomes without imperialist intervention is difficult to imagine.

It is also easy to follow the logic that canned foods offer a solution to the lack of arable land, cold storage, and unreliable distribution networks across the Pacific. Evidence also shows that ethnic tensions in Island states are exacerbated where non-Indigenous peoples control food retail; examples of arson connected with western-food distribution have been identified in Tonga, Fiji and the Solomons. Yet the Pacific diaspora, today living in the suburbs of Australia, New Zealand and North America, still has a taste for corned beef, Irish stew and steak & kidney pie, products that are now marginalised in western supermarkets. Visit a Pacific Island food store in Sydney and you will find shelves loaded with these products. Tins of corned beef can reach 4.5kg; comprised of 20 per cent fat and the remainder a gelatinous gloop, Islanders in the west are choosing to eat it, usually stir-fried with 2-minute noodles, soy sauce and garlic. Attend a Pacific Islander festival in Australia and you will find huge enthusiasm for fried chicken, Dagwood Dogs and Pluto Pups. If it weren't so unhealthy, we could call it 'cultural hybridity'.

There are no laws intervening in a person's right to eat themselves to death. Australians are sufficiently self-conscious about our past exploitation of the Pacific (slavery, land acquisition, plunder of natural resources) that we are hesitant to be telling Islanders how to live their lives. The language of 'food sovereignty' is beginning to eclipse the discourse of 'food security'. Great sensitivity and caution is adopted any time a

health intervention is attempted.² A recently published book by two anthropologists — *Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the Pacific Islands* — examines mutton flaps, primarily in Papua New Guinea and Fiji, through the symbolic register of Islander cultures, without attempting to impose any judgment about the adverse health outcomes of this diet.³ But ongoing studies by nutritionists and medical scientists question our reticence to intervene. Rod Jackson, a New Zealand epidemiologist, has described the rates of death caused by poor food choices as 'dietary genocide',⁴ and this health crisis has probably killed more Pacific Islanders than all other colonial misadventures put together, including nuclear testing.

Economic shock has achieved, in the example of Nauru, what healthy-eating programs and foreign aid programs have not. After mining and corruption decimated their prosperity, Nauruans have been pushed to re-learn traditional skills such as hunting octopus from the fringing reef at low tide. They have been forced to walk instead of drive. In Tuvalu, one of the Pacific's poorest countries, life expectancy approaches western levels; their isolation forces them to rely on farming and fishing as their primary food sources. Some of the rare glimmers of hope arise, perhaps unfairly, where poverty forces Pacific Islanders to return to more traditional subsistence lifestyle, and glean selectively what they need from the global economy.

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2. See, eg. Wendy Snowdon et al. 'Evidence-informed process to identify policies that will promote a healthy food environment in the Pacific Islands' (2010) 13(6) *Public Health Nutrition*, 886–892.

3. Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington, *Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the Pacific Islands* (2010).

4. Kathy Marks, 'Pacific islanders' fatal diet blamed on Kiwi exports', *The Independent* (UK), 24 March 2002 <independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/pacific-islanders-fatal-diet-blamed-on-kiwi-exports-655190.html> at 8 November 2010.