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Interview with David Robinson Simon

By OUR HEN HOUSE

Published November 30, 2013

Following is a transcript of an interview with **DAVID ROBINSON SIMON** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 203.

JASMIN: Today, we have a very special guest, Dave Simon, who wrote the new book *Meatonomics*. And this is an interesting connection to what we were talking about earlier with Josh Tetrick.

MARIANN: Yeah, absolutely. Economics is the name of the game here, and what Josh is doing is trying to bring down the cost of plant-based foods, but equally important is to make animal-based foods cost what they really should cost, and that is to reduce the subsidies and actually bill the animal agriculture industry for all of the harms they are doing. And that's more of a political project. I mean, Josh can work on his own, but to make these changes in policy that are propping up the animal ag business, we all need to inform ourselves of what's going on. We all need to be really on this because these industries are powerful, but our voices can be powerful too. And the person who's gonna tell us -- I mean, this book, we have needed this book so much, and I'm so excited that it's here, 'cause it's got all of that information for us.

JASMIN: And here we have the incredible Dave Simon.

David Robinson Simon is a lawyer and advocate for sustainable consumption. He works as general counsel for a healthcare company and serves on the board of the APRL Fund, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting animals. David received his BA from UC Berkeley, and his JD from the University of Southern California. He is also the author of *New Millennium Law Dictionary*, a full-length legal dictionary. He lives in Southern California with his partner, artist Tania Marie, and their rabbit, tortoise, and two cats. Learn more about David's new book, *Meatonomics*, at [meatonomics.com](#).

Welcome to Our Hen House, Dave. We're so glad that you're joining us today.

DAVID: Thanks so much for having me.

JASMIN: We are such big fans of *Meatonomics*. This is a book that is just absolutely refreshing, and we're so glad you wrote it. Can you give our listeners a nutshell version of what *Meatonomics* is about?

DAVID: Yeah, it's about the unseen economic forces and consequences that are associated with producing meat and dairy, and some of the ways that those forces influence consumers in ways that people have not previously been aware.

MARIANN: Yeah, and it's such an important topic, and I really encourage everyone to read this book because it's something we all need to know about whether we want to or not. And I know you talk a lot about a lot of different ways that the meat industry is costing us all a lot of money. But I'd like to start with the most obvious and direct one that people sort of know about, and that's subsidies. Most of us have heard that the animal food industry is heavily subsidized, but we don't really know how that works. And in fact, you occasionally hear from ranchers or individual farmers that they don't get any subsidies, and sometimes it's not quite as direct as that. Can you explain how subsidies work and what kind of subsidies are propping up the meat industry?

DAVID: Yeah, there are a lot of subsidies that people simply aren't aware of, just because they're not on their radar, and they're called things that most laypeople wouldn't be aware of, like crop insurance or milk loss contracts. They're not always labeled direct subsidies to meat and dairy. In many cases there are things like irrigation subsidies, and in many cases they're not just provided by the federal government but they're provided by state governments. And I for example was shocked to learn that there are massive irrigation subsidies just a few hours away from where I live, with the result being that farmers in the San Joaquin Valley have something like 98 cents of every dollar of water that they purchase subsidized by state and local governments.

MARIANN: Wow. Yeah, that's really extraordinary. And what about crop subsidies? I know that all that corn that's growing out there, it's not all for corn-on-the-cob, right?

DAVID: That's right. Corn and soybeans are the most common feed that is fed to farmed animals, and both of those crops are also heavily subsidized. So, any calculation of subsidies to the meat industry really needs to include those subsidies as well, and so in the book I do include calculations related to subsidizing feed crops.

JASMIN: And you also put a price on animal cruelty. I have to say, though I obviously consider this the highest priority, I've never thought of it as an economic issue. Can you explain how you put a price tag on it?

DAVID: Yeah, a couple of years ago, some agricultural economists published a book in which they actually came up with a mechanism for measuring the amount of money that humans who are concerned about animal suffering would be willing to pay to end certain practices that factory farmers engage in. So, for example, they gave people the ability to actually bid in a real auction setting on moving hens from battery cages to cage-free environments, and moving sows from gestation crates to pasture environments. And taking that data, what people would be willing to actually pull their own wallets out of their pockets and take their own dollars out of their wallets, and spend on better lives for animals, we can extrapolate, we can estimate that something like, that Americans would spend something like 20 billion dollars each year to provide better living conditions for farmed animals.

MARIANN: I just think that's a fascinating way to look at that. And I mean, of course we know that animal ag is externalizing a lot of its costs, but I never really thought of the fact that they're externalizing the cost of animal cruelty. But some of the other ways that they're

externalizing their costs are a lot more obvious to us that we've heard about, and one of them is of course environmental damage. We all pay for meat in so many different ways, whether vegan or not, and we're all aware that the industry causes huge environmental damage. But how do you put a price tag on that? And who is paying for that price?

DAVID: Yeah, to answer the first question, how do we put a price tag, there are many published peer-reviewed studies that have added up the actual costs of producing meat and dairy. And what I did in the course of writing the book was I just went through those studies and added up the costs of the environmental damage related to meat and dairy production, and therefore things like water pollution, groundwater contamination, air pollution, devaluation of real estate located near factory farms, climate change mitigation, many factors that together add up to about 37 billion dollars every year.

MARIANN: So, that includes climate change and mitigation for all these problems, but isn't there an additional cost of the harms that we're not mitigating, like the fact that we're ending our world as we know it and we're all gonna be underwater?

DAVID: Well, there are -- you know, unfortunately, I tried to limit my calculations in the book to published research. There are lots of costs that simply have not been addressed yet and have not been added up. For example, marine services, which are things like filtration, the idea that water needs to be regularly filtered through shellfish or through other organic processes, those have real economic value to the global economy. Some estimate that the value of services like that is in the trillions. But so far, the cost associated with the degradation of our oceans as a result of fishing has not been adequately calculated, so it's simply not possible. That number just isn't in the book yet. Maybe in the future edition, it will be.

MARIANN: Oh. So, basically, what you're saying is that as dire as the economic costs are that you have so well documented in this book, it's really a hugely conservative estimate.

DAVID: I think it's quite conservative, yeah.

JASMIN: Perhaps the biggest cost is health, but people choose what they eat and most people would say that the industry is just satisfying demand. How is the industry to blame for the health harms that its products cause when people aren't being forced to buy them?

DAVID: Well, that's really a great question. Economics often are fond of looking at a market like this, and asking the question, is this market driven by consumers? That is to say, it's driven by things like consumer traits and preferences, and disposable income, or is it driven by producers, which is to say, is it driven by pricing, is it driven by producer behavior? And the animal food industry is fond of simply throwing up its hands and saying, "Hey, we know that consumption of animal products has doubled in the last century, but don't blame us. We're simply trying to meet the demand of consumers." However, I think the story's much more complicated than that, and one of the themes of the book is that in fact, it is producers who have taken it upon themselves to engage in a variety of aggressive behaviors that result in their driving this market. So, for example, producers keep prices artificially low; producers seek assistance from state and federal lawmakers to surround themselves with a framework of legal protections that allows them to offload all these costs that we've been talking about. So, there is very strong evidence that the high levels of consumption we see

today in the United States and increasingly around the world are the result of producer behavior rather than consumer preferences.

MARIANN: Yeah, that's the first time I've really heard that said, was in your book, and I think it's a fascinating -- it's a really, really important fact for us all to recognize, 'cause so much have been, I've been bamboozled by the whole idea that kind of that as wealth takes hold in places like China, I mean, China being the big player here, that it's inevitable that people will latch onto wanting more meat in their diet. And perhaps it is inevitable that people will want some more unless they find out the harms, but what you're saying is that they're really being pushed to want more and more.

DAVID: Yes, that's what I think is happening.

MARIANN: So, what are some of these health harms? And who is paying for them? We've heard that meat is linked to heart disease, diabetes, cancer. The personal ramifications of these diseases are obvious, but what are the economic ramifications?

DAVID: Yeah. Just those three diseases -- heart disease, diabetes and cancer -- cost the United States about 900 billion dollars each year. And when I say it costs the United States that much, what we're really saying is it costs taxpayers and those who pay insurance premiums for healthcare, because that's who ultimately pays those bills. And of that 900 billion, there is clinic literature to suggest that about a third of those costs is attributable to consumption of meat and dairy. So, something like 314 billion dollars each year is the externalized cost related to healthcare of consuming meat and dairy in the US.

MARIANN: You know, in reading your book and hearing these numbers and thinking about all of these economic consequences, it just really crystallized my thoughts about what it means to be vegan. Vegans like to think that they're really abstaining from animal products, but if we're paying our taxes we really can't be, can we?

DAVID: No, everybody in the country is incurring these costs regardless of what we eat. And I think the average taxpayer spends something like 1,500 dollars each year toward covering the cost of meat and dairy production in this country.

MARIANN: Wow, that's a staggering statistic, and I have to say, anybody reading your book, it's like on every page there's some staggering statistic that you kind of just can't believe. But you're extremely well-documented, but that is one that really blows my mind. I just hate the thought that I'm contributing all that money to create all this harm.

JASMIN: Yeah, I completely agree. And another thing that strikes me is the fact that one of the problems that all animal activists face is that we're not experts. The industry claims that because we are outside of the industry, we can't understand it; only they can understand it. How did you become such an expert in these issues?

DAVID: Well, first of all I had a lot of help. I asked for a lot of advice from people who were the true experts, people with PhDs in Economics, Nutrition, and other fields. And I had a lot of great advice on the manuscript as I wrote it. But I really just immersed myself in this stuff for a little over three years and spent a lot of time on it. The book has 700 end notes, so there are a lot of sources cited.

MARIANN: It's an incredibly valuable tool, and as I said, I really want everybody to read it because it is -- none of us can claim that we had jobs in this industry, that we're familiar; we all have to learn this. But we really do have to learn it if we're going to fight it. And one of the reasons we do is in order to get legislative change. And most of us tend to think of the government, especially the USDA, as being more part of the problem than part of the solution when it comes to this industry, and you certainly support that in your book. So, what is the role that the USDA, and other government agencies, but mainly the USDA, plays?

DAVID: Unfortunately, the USDA finds itself in a very schizophrenic position with respect to the animal food industry and consumers, because on the one hand, its mission is to support the animal food industry and to increase sales of animal foods, and it is factory farmers who are the main clients of the USDA. And on the other hand, the USDA has this completely diametrically opposed mission, which is to make recommendations to American consumers about how much and which kinds of foods we should eat to satisfy our nutritional needs. And these opposing missions frequently come into conflict. For example, a couple years ago the USDA released a brochure in which it encouraged people to eat less cheese because cheese contains cholesterol and saturated fat and these both lead to heart disease and other problems. And at the same time, a different set of people within the very same agency were teaming up with Domino's Pizza to promote a new kind of pizza that contains six different kinds of cheeses and one half of this pizza exceeds a person's recommended daily allowance of saturated fat.

JASMIN: Wow.

DAVID: So, the USDA simply cannot figure out what its mission is, and that leads to a lot of confusing advice for consumers.

MARIANN: Yeah, and you can't help but think that that poor schlunk who wrote the brochure encouraging people to eat less cheese probably got fired the next day.

JASMIN: Yeah. What about the "humane meat movement," big quotes on "humane"? We all know that increasingly, consumers who are becoming suspicious of the horrors of the meat industrial complex are turning to foods that are local or they're organic. Does this make things better?

DAVID: Well, unfortunately, while I think it's laudable to treat animals more humanely, the evidence suggests that with respect to things like organically raised animal foods and locally raised animal foods, that in many ways, the humane issues are not much different from those in factory farms. In fact, many organic animals are raised in factory farms. Cage-free hens are often raised in factory environments; they just happen not to be in cages, but they're subjected to all the same inhumane treatments that battery hens are, other than that closed confinement. But there's also this sort of sense among the environmental community that organically raised or locally raised animals are more environmentally friendly. And even there, the evidence is very inconclusive. For example, because organically raised animals require more land, there is some thought that they're less environmentally friendly. Because locally raised animals are often raised in less efficient ways, there's also some evidence that suggests that in some instances, it's simply more environmentally friendly to buy animal foods from across the country, which sort of, again, is not something that I would advocate, but it defeats the idea that, hey, we can solve all these problems simply by raising animals organically or locally.

MARIANN: Yeah, you do tend to feel like all of this local and sustainable, local-as-sustainable conversation tends to be a little pie-in-the-sky, that it's just a fantasy that people want to return to some prior time. And you can't even really think about this on a global scale when we have the population that we've got, and we have to feed them. Can you talk a little bit about global food sustainability? How do animal foods intersect with world hunger issues?

DAVID: Well, it takes significantly more grain to feed people an animal-based diet than it does to feed them a plant-based diet, and we've long known that we could essentially either solve or radically alleviate world hunger simply by feeding people the grain that is being fed to animals. But as far as issues like organic, which is another good example, there's simply not enough land available on the planet to raise animals organically. And furthermore, we have this demand issue, where demand is increasing around the world, and at some point, when the rest of the world wants to consume as much as Americans are consuming today, and by the way, we lead the world in per capita meat consumption. When the rest of the world catches up to us, the planet will be short, or something like two-thirds, we'll need something like two-thirds, again, the amount of land that currently exists on the planet just to raise the feed to feed those animals. So, we're simply not headed in a sustainable direction at all.

MARIANN: I love that you have these figures, because I'm always saying these kind of things, but I don't have any figures to back it up and now I do.

DAVID: Well, there you go. It's all in the book.

JASMIN: The industry, or at least the beef industry, often says that a lot of land is not appropriate for raising crops, and we would just be wasting that land if we didn't graze cattle on it. How do you respond to that?

DAVID: Well, in many cases, the reason that land is not appropriate for crops is that cattle *have* been grazing on it for so long that they've caused land to erode, they've degraded it, or they've done what's called desertification. When cattle graze on land for a long period of time, they'll literally turn it into a desert and it takes a long time for that land to recover.

MARIANN: So, that's just one of about a gazillion issues in *Meatonomics*, and you can actually get pretty overwhelmed reading this book because it reveals how big this problem is, how many sub-problems there are, and it seems impossible in some ways to get a grip on what to do about it. But you do have suggestions for people, and what do you suggest that people can do about it?

DAVID: Well, the first obvious suggestion, which for most of your audience would be preaching to the choir, is simply to eat less animal foods or to go vegan entirely. And people can see immediate health benefits and they can help the environment significantly by taking a step like that. But I spend some time in the book discussing the idea of a meat tax, which would be an institutional change at the federal level. And to put this in context, we tax tobacco in this country today at about the rate of 70% on average, so a typical \$5 pack of cigarettes has added on top of it about a \$3.50 tax. The meat tax that I suggest would be a 50% meat tax, less than the tobacco tax, still certainly a significant tax, so that a \$5 Big Mac, for example, would now cost \$7.50. And the effect of that tax would really be twofold. It would have two very important benefits. One is it would significantly reduce consumption

of animal foods. It would switch that consumption to plant-based foods. And secondly, it would generate a lot of tax revenue, and the states that have implemented cigarette taxes have really seen tremendous results, both in terms of people smoking less and in terms of significant boosts to their tax revenue base.

MARIANN: I think it's -- obviously -- I think it's a fabulous idea. I'd love to see a meat tax. But do you think that the idea of ending subsidies is more politically attractive than adding a tax?

DAVID: Well, I think ending subsidies is important, and I advocate for that as well. I sort of suggest several institutional changes. Ending subsidies is one. Changing the way the USDA works is another, and adding this tax is a third. I think that while ending subsidies is important, and there may be some political support for that because pretty much everybody hates them except the animal food producers who benefit from them and the lawmakers in those states that benefit from the donations that those producers provide. The effect of eliminating subsidies would not have a tremendous consequence in terms of reducing consumption, which is to say that, even if we eliminate all 38 billion dollars of annual subsidies each year to animal food production, that might only reduce consumption by two, three, maybe five percent. But what really needs to happen is that consumption needs to drop by a significant number, and the tax and other things that I suggest would reduce it by something like forty-four percent, which would take us back to where we were, oh, almost a century ago, in terms of per capita meat consumption.

JASMIN: How did you get involved with this issue? What compelled you to devote what must have been a staggering amount of time and effort to write this book?

DAVID: That's a great question. You know, I think I would point back to an event where I sent, I emailed a video showing some factory farming practices to a bunch of friends and asked what they thought of the video. And I got a wide variety of responses, many that you would sort of expect. But the response that sort of stuck out came from a friend who was a law professor and the dean of a major law school, and he said that in his view, the behaviors shown in the video were disturbing and deplorable, but they were illegal, and because they were illegal, that meant they were sort of anomalous, exceptional, they didn't suggest there was a systemic problem. And for that reason, he thought that the video didn't really give him that much trouble because, while it's a problem, it's not widespread. And this was a number of years ago, this was maybe six years ago. And at the time I simply didn't know how to respond to that 'cause I didn't know what the situation was.

But I am a lawyer, and I do have access to legal resources, and I started digging around to find out whether what he was saying was true, and sadly it's not. It's not illegal to treat farmed animals inhumanely. Farmed animals today, in this country, have essentially no legal protections whatsoever. Virtually every state has eliminated legal protections for farm animals through what's called customary farming exemptions. And these exemptions and other laws that have been passed at the state and federal level in the last several decades surround the factory farming industry with this very valuable mechanism of protection that insulates them, in most cases, from prosecution for animal cruelty, from civil lawsuits. And they've made it harder to investigate them, to sue them, to criticize them. And they've taken away all cruelty protections that once applied to farm animals. So, I guess it was my finding that out that sort of made a light bulb go off and made me realize, hey, there's some

information here that I certainly wasn't aware of. I think a lot of people weren't. And maybe it's worth writing a book.

MARIANN: Yeah, I hear you. I totally agree. I am a lawyer as well, and sometimes I'm asked to speak to law students or whatever about careers in animal law. And though I love to see this passion, it's hard to advise people that they can make a whole career out of fighting animal cruelty, particularly if the animals they care about are farmed animals, because the law just isn't -- there's just not a lot of law available to work with. So, would you advise young lawyers who want to know how to make an impact to start thinking of some litigation attempts to address some of these harms caused by the meat industry, such as the human health harms?

DAVID: I certainly think that there are a lot of ways to attack the problem, and focusing on legislative efforts is certainly one. There are also -- I, for example, one of the things I've been doing recently is some pro bono lawsuits that have the First Amendment behind them, where we're trying to get venues to open up and allow protesters to exercise free speech rights. And we're sort of in the middle of this movement. We know that more people go vegan every year. We know that these issues increasingly are on people's radar, and we've sort of got this groundswell of momentum that we just need to continue to push forward. But I think that as a law student looking forward to a career in animal law, I think that there are various ways to go that don't all end in a dead-end when you come up against customary farming exemptions.

JASMIN: How has *Meatonomics* been received?

DAVID: Well, it's been reviewed six times, all favorably, in some cases, in some mainstream media like the Huffington Post, in some cases in some animal-oriented media like VegNews. And the reviews have been favorable. I've been speaking about it across the country, and in one instance in Canada. And the talks have been very well-received; people are very enthusiastic about the information. And it's just a question of trying to get the mainstream readers to open the book and read it. And I think vegans and vegetarians have been very receptive to it, and that's perfect. And I'd love to see the mainstream "conscious consumer" community embrace this book the way they embrace things like *An Omnivore's Dilemma*.

MARIANN: Yeah, absolutely. I think that really crystallizes where so much of the movement is right now, that the minds that are coming to this movement and the work that is being put into it and the products that are being produced are really stellar at this point. And at this point, it's just a matter of breaking it into the mainstream and getting it read by people. What can people do to help you publicize the book?

DAVID: Well, let's see. They could go to my Facebook page and like it, and they could go to my blog and get blog posts. And every time they share a blog or a post on their own Facebook pages, they help spread the word to their own friends who are not vegan or vegetarian.

JASMIN: Absolutely. I strongly encourage everyone to support David Robinson Simon and *Meatonomics*. We are truly honored to have you on our show today. And by the way, Our Hen House is currently working on a review of it as well, so it'll be eight reviews. And we're both very big fans of all that you're doing, and it's refreshing, the work that you're putting out

there. I really think that it's going to change the world for animals. It already is. So, thank you for joining us today on Our Hen House and for sharing your story.

DAVID: Oh, thank you so much for having me.

JASMIN: That was David Robinson Simon, author of *Meatonomics*, which you could learn more about at meatonomics.com.