



**Red Wheel • Weiser • Conari**  
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**An Interview with David Robinson Simon**  
**author of**  
**MEATONOMICS**  
**How the Rigged Economics of Meat and**  
**Dairy Make You Consume Too Much**  
**How to Eat Better, Live Longer, and Spend Smarter**

**1. What is *Meatonomics* about?**

- a. The book explores the unseen economic forces that drive our animal food system, and the weird ways these forces affect consumers' eating, spending, health, prosperity, and longevity. Among other things, we've lost the ability to decide for ourselves what – and how much – to eat. Instead, those decisions are mostly made for us by meat and dairy producers who control our buying choices with artificially low prices, misleading messaging, and heavy control over legislation and regulation.

**2. How do animal food producers keep retail prices artificially low?**

- a. By “externalizing” their costs, or imposing them on society. *Meatonomics* is the first book to add up the massive externalized costs that the animal food system imposes on taxpayers, animals and the environment, and it finds these costs total about \$414 billion yearly. With yearly retail sales of around \$250 billion, that means that for every \$1 of product they sell, meat and dairy producers impose almost \$2 in hidden costs on the rest of us. But if producers were forced to internalize these costs, a \$4 Big Mac would cost about \$11 and a \$5 carton of organic eggs would cost \$13.

**3. \$414 billion is a huge number. Can you explain where these costs come from?**

- a. Each year, the animal food industry bills society about \$314 billion in healthcare costs, \$38 billion in government subsidies, \$37 billion in environmental costs, \$21 billion in cruelty costs, and \$4 billion in costs of fishing. It's bad enough that society has to bear these expenses, but the problems go much deeper than just money. The forces of meatonomics contribute to epidemics of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, widespread degradation of land and water resources, and the legal, routine abuse of 60 billion land and marine animals yearly.



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- 4. Don't all industries externalize some costs? Is the animal food industry really any different?**
  - a. Other industries externalize costs too, but the animal food industry literally dwarfs all the others. For example, electricity generation, despite its massive burning of coal and petroleum, generates only about one-third the externalized costs of animal foods.
  
- 5. How can economic forces cause health problems like obesity and heart disease?**
  - a. The artificially low prices of meatonomics encourage Americans to eat twice the meat and dairy they would otherwise. According to hundreds of published studies, this high consumption is responsible for diseases like cancer, diabetes and heart disease. Today, two in three Americans are overweight, one in three has heart disease, and one in nine has diabetes. About a third of the costs to treat these diseases is related to animal foods, which is where the estimate of \$314 billion in healthcare costs comes from.
  
- 6. But don't people buy animal foods for a lot of reasons besides just their price? Some people like the way these foods taste, and some do it out of simple habit.**
  - a. It's true there are lots of factors that influence consumption. But studies show that on average, despite all the other factors that influence demand, a 10% move in price causes about a 6.5% move in consumption levels of animal foods. The difference of 3.5% is a reasonable approximation of the influence that other factors, like taste and habit, have on buying decisions.
  
- 7. You said the system generates major environmental costs as well. Can you elaborate?**
  - a. Factory farming causes widespread environmental damage in the form of air and water pollution, degradation of land, and contribution to climate change. The documented, externalized costs related to these problems total about \$37 billion each year. These expenses are for things like fixing leaky manure lagoons, lost productivity of farmland, and devaluation of real estate near factory farms.
  
- 8. Increasingly, consumers are turning to foods that are local or organic. Can we reduce our environmental impact by buying only local or organic animal foods?**
  - a. Unfortunately, contrary to popular belief, organic and local methods of producing animal foods are no more eco-friendly than conventional production. The bottom line is that at our current consumption levels, animal foods simply cannot be produced sustainably. The demands on the system are just too high. For example, U.S. farm animals produce one trillion pounds of waste each year, enough to fill Giants Stadium in New York 250 times. That waste just sits in thousands of manure lagoons across the country and slowly seeps into our rivers, lakes, and groundwater. The only way to solve this problem is for people to dramatically lower their consumption.



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**9. You mentioned a cost associated with animal cruelty. How did you come up with that?**

- a. Virtually all animals consumed in this country are produced in factory environments. Fish and farm animals have no legal rights, so it's perfectly legal to treat these animals in any way that's cost-effective. That often means chopping off body parts like beaks, genitals, and tails without anesthetic, hyper-confining animals in spaces too small to move, and denying various basic needs. Economists ran a live auction in which people used real money to bid on measures that would improve farm animals' lives. I extrapolated from this data to estimate what Americans would pay to end the five most egregious factory farming practices: battery cages for laying hens, gestation crates for pigs, zero grazing for dairy cows, genetic manipulation and hyper-confinement of broiler chickens, and inhumane slaughter of farmed fish. Using the real auction data, I estimate that Americans would pay about \$21 billion to end these practices.

**10. A lot of the problems you're describing sound like they should be illegal, or at least better regulated. What is the government doing about it?**

- a. The animal food industry protects its profits by leaning on lawmakers and regulatory agencies. The result is that state and federal legislators have passed scores of laws in the past few decades that eliminate anti-cruelty protections for farm animals and make it harder to investigate, criticize or sue factory farm operators. These laws are bad for consumers and animals, and they help only the big corporate producers that get them passed. Moreover, regulatory agencies routinely turn a blind eye to problems in industry that they should be fixing. The FDA, for example, has been trying unsuccessfully for more than thirty years to withdraw animal drugs that it says are unsafe for humans because they increase our risk of disease and antibiotic resistance.

**11. Well, that all sounds pretty bad. What can be done about it?**

- a. There are two ways to solve the problem: individual change and institutional change. On an individual level, you might decide to eat less animal foods or give them up altogether. Among other benefits to this lifestyle change, vegetarians are slimmer and healthier than the rest of society and have lower cholesterol and longer lifespans. On an institutional level, a meat tax would return American meat and dairy consumption to healthier levels and reverse many of the problems of meatonomics. I know everyone hates taxes, but this proposal wouldn't cost anything extra because it includes an offsetting tax credit. The result is to shift consumption to healthier protein sources while putting cash back in people's pockets, so we don't spend more money on food than otherwise. The combination of a 50% meat tax and eliminating subsidies to the animal food industry would reduce animal food consumption by about 44% and provide benefits like these:
  - i. Almost 200,000 fewer human deaths from cancer, diabetes and heart disease



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- each year.
- ii. 26 billion fewer land and marine animals killed each year.
  - iii. A 3.4 trillion-pound drop in the emission of carbon dioxide equivalents. That's like garaging all 250 million land and water vehicles in the U.S. each year.
  - iv. An area twice the size of Texas would no longer be needed for agriculture and could be returned to forest, grassland, or other native habitat.
  - v. \$26 billion in annual savings to Medicare and Medicaid.
  - vi. Yearly cash surplus of \$32 billion in the U.S. Treasury.
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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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 non-profit dedicated to protecting animals.

David received his B.A. from U.C. Berkeley and his J.D. 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.



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David Robinson Simon  
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