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Animal Ethics 101

Think veganism is only about what you eat? UCSB's Vegan Studies course shows how the practice relates to global concerns

By **BRETT LEIGH DICKS**
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Mention the word veganism and some might dismiss a conversation about it as not offering a lot of sustenance. But UCSB professor Renan Larue knows there's more to the subject than just bean spouts and tofu.

He's helping his students get to the meat of the matter through a Vegan Studies course highlighting the reach of veganism's influences and showing that it is much more than just about choosing a plant-based diet over one incorporating animals and animal by-products. Introduced into the school's curriculum last fall, the course examines the intersection of vegan and vegetarian food and lifestyle practices in the context of history, religion, philosophy, politics, economics and psychology.

"Veganism is a very rich and relevant subject," Dr. Larue told the News-Press prior to one of his recent classes, which are held weekly. "There are many fields around veganism. I thought it would be a good course for the students here at UCSB because there are a lot of vegetarians, a lot of vegans and a lot of people who are interested in subjects like animal studies and rights, and the environment."

According to Dr. Larue, the course is the first of its kind in the United States.

In addition to the academic component, it focuses on bringing in an array of guest speakers who not only address the students but the general public through lectures held on campus. On Monday, from 6 to 7:30 p.m., best-selling author, vegan pioneer and animal rights advocate Gene Baur, co-founder of Farm Sanctuary, a nonprofit dedicated to farmed animal rescue, protection and advocacy, will give a presentation in UCSB's Life Sciences Building, Room 1001.

The origins of the Vegan Studies course stem from Dr. Larue's own research interests. In 2011, he earned a Ph.D. in French literature from the Université de Picardie Jules-Verne. His dissertation centered around the history of vegetarianism in the West and subsequently formed the basis for a book "Le Végétarisme et ses ennemis: Vingt-cinq siècles de débats" ("Vegetarianism and its Enemies: Twenty-five Centuries of Debate") (Universitaires de France, 2015).

Not only is veganism a subject of academic pursuit for Dr. Larue, an

assistant professor in French in the Department of French and Italian at UCSB, it is an issue near and dear to his heart.

"I turned vegetarian when I was 17 or 18 and then became a vegan five years ago," said Dr. Larue, 36. "I wanted to

work on this subject because it was a huge topic with religious questions like, Why does God allow us to kill and eat animals? There's also anthropological questions such as, Are we designed to eat meat? And there are philosophical questions too: Do animals have rights?

"There are many, many important questions. During the 18th century and during the Antiquity

and the Middle Ages, a lot of people were vegetarians and there were a lot of very important debates around this issue. I wanted to examine these."

While debates surrounding vegetarianism and veganism first arose almost 3,000 years ago, Dr. Larue says

FYI

Gene Baur, co-founder of Farm Sanctuary, a nonprofit dedicated to farmed animal rescue, protection and advocacy, will give a presentation 6 to 7:30 p.m. Monday in UCSB's Life Sciences Building, Room 1001.

For more information about UCSB's Vegan Studies course and coming events, go to www.facebook.com/veganstudiesucsb.

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At top, while animal welfare issues have been a topic of fierce debate throughout history, never have they been so important as in today's society, says UCSB professor Renan Larue, who teaches a course in Vegan Studies.

As we struggle to come to terms with various environmental and social issues, UCSB professor Renan Larue suggests that finding an answer to them could come through combining a broader outlook with a little more empathy. To that end, he has recently introduced a course in Vegan Studies at UCSB.



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modern society and its associated lifestyle means they are more important than ever.

"Those debates began 26 or 27 centuries ago," he said. "But now we talk more and more about those issues because of global warming. Meat and dairy consumption has a huge impact on global warming, deforestation and the pollution of water and soil."

"People are also more and more sensitive to animals for many reasons. When there is less war and violence around us, we become more sensitive to the suffering of animals. For many centuries, we thought we needed protein from animals, but now we know they cause health issues such as cancers, heart attacks and so on. Those things are linked to the consumption of red meat and dairy products."

These issues are perfectly illustrated through the course's guest lecturer series.

University of Massachusetts Boston professor and vegan activist Melanie Joy was a speaker in February. Her 2011 book "Why

We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism" (Conari Press) brought the term 'carnism' to the fore while last week Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz gave a talk entitled "On Humans & Animals: To Whom Are We Responsible?," which explored the intersection of veganism and Judaism.

Next up it is Mr. Baur, who will be discussing his work at Farm Sanctuary.

Founded in the 1980s, Farm Sanctuary supported its initial animal rescue efforts by selling vegetarian hot dogs out of an old VW van at Grateful Dead concerts. Thirty-some years later, the organization is now the largest nonprofit dedicated to farmed animal rescue, protection and advocacy, operating three shelters in New York and California.

Comedian Jon Stewart, who left Comedy Central's popular political satirical program, "The Daily Show," in 2015, is now in the process of establishing a refuge for farmed animals at his New Jersey homestead. The shelter will be Farm Sanctuary's fourth location.

Providing rescue, refuge and adoption for hundreds of

farm animals each year, Farm Sanctuary shelters enable visitors to connect with farm animals as emotional, intelligent individuals. Mr. Baur believes these animals stand as ambassadors for the billions of factory farm animals who have no voice, and he has dedicated his career to advocating on their behalf.

UCSB's Vegan Studies course will be offered again next year. In addition to shedding light on endeavors such as Mr. Baur's, Dr. Larue said it is more important than ever for animal rights and its associated issues to be tackled in an academic environment.

"It is the responsibility of universities such as UCSB to make the people more aware of the consequences of their food choices and find solutions to the terrifying crisis we are going to face in the coming years and decades," he said.

"We need to talk about this more and more today, especially here in California because of things like the drought. The breeding of animals means a big, big, waste of water. The issues in this course are the issues the world faces today."