

Interview with John Davis of the IVU



John Davis is manager and historian of the IVU (International Vegetarian Union www.ivu.org). The IVU has about 120 member organisations (including Vegan Views), and many individual supporters on every continent of the world - and in recent years IVU has become more and more 'veganised'. John lives in rural England but travels to many vegetarian and vegan events worldwide, usually at his own expense. The photo here shows him being interviewed by Chinese TV, at the first ever vegetarian congress in China in 2011.

In 2010 he began to compile a series of 'History of Veganism' articles, which were posted in blog form on the internet. To date there are over 80 such articles, and most are also available in a pdf compilation 'World Veganism - Past, Present and Future'. See www.ivu.org/history/vegan.html

These fascinating articles cover topics such as 'Were there vegans in the ancient world?' (reprinted in V.V.124), vegans in the Middle Ages, prototype and pioneer vegans, notable figures such as

Henry Salt and Gandhi, then the growth of vegetarian/vegan ideas worldwide (China, India, Africa, Latin America, and so on), and finally there's much discussion of current trends and how things might pan out in the future.

John was a pioneer of vegetarianism on the internet from the early days of the world wide web in 1994. He maintained the first websites for the UK Vegetarian Society, Viva!, and the European Vegetarian Union, as well as being involved with many others, and in 1995 he built the first IVU website. In 2006, after many years of working for the IVU, he became its manager.

How did you get involved with the International Vegetarian Union? Can you sum up the IVU's role, and how it's changed in the years you've been involved?

I got on the primitive internet in 1994, having become aware of a small number of other veg*ns using it, and I was soon working with some of them in running websites. At the end of 1995 we were looking at how to improve the resources and I contacted the IVU General Secretary to see if any money was available. There wasn't, but he promptly asked me if I'd set up a website for IVU, and we had it online in December 1995.

IVU's primary role is to encourage veg groups from different countries to share ideas and to help each other. Up to the late 1990s that was almost entirely in Europe, North America and some in India. The basic role hasn't really changed, but since 2004 we have focussed much more on the developing world, and the internet has made it possible to be more proactive now that we can be in constant contact with each other so easily and cheaply.



The first IVU congress, held in Dresden in 1908, was attended by just 22 people

In your 'Vegetarian equals vegan!' article you begin by saying "The first people who called themselves 'vegetarian' were in fact vegan. This has now been established conclusively with resources not previously available." This was in the UK, circa 1840. It's fascinating to read the articles in which you trace the conflict between lacto-ovo-vegetarian and vegan ideas, and how the vegan ideas largely lost out. Do you think it was

always likely that the vegan concept would become downgraded to lacto-ovo-vegetarianism? At that time veganism would obviously have been quite difficult for most people, much more so than now.

What we now call veganism was certainly much more difficult in the mid 19th century - even margarine hadn't been invented, and soya milk was unknown in the West. A significant group did attempt it, but by the late 19th century they were outnumbered by a far bigger increase in ovo-lacto-vegetarians. That was partly down to the main ovo-lacto group having more money and influence, and the way they interpreted the Bible to promote the 'land of milk and honey' (and eggs).

By the late 19th century ovo-lacto-vegetarianism was far more popular than many people today might imagine. In 1897 Central London alone had 11 vegetarian restaurants and two vegetarian hotels. The meat-eaters, as well as 'vegans', routinely accused the 'vegetarians' of hypocrisy as eggs/dairy were obviously not vegetation, and despite attempts to defend it, the problem of the misuse of the word never went away.



Back in Dresden in 2008 - rather more attended this time

Veganism was, shall we say, marginal within the vegetarian movement only a few decades back. But that has changed, and nowadays many vegetarians accept veganism as the ideal - even if they don't go all the way themselves. What do you think are the reasons for that big shift in attitude?

The simple answer is the internet - and the Americans. Records on Google Books show that the word 'vegan', invented in 1944, was very little used for 50 years, then from 1995 it suddenly appeared in a lot more book titles, mostly cookbooks, as a result of publicity by prominent vegan websites. By 2011 there were more books with the word 'vegan' in the title than 'vegetarian'.

This vast increase in easily available information does appear to have raised awareness of both a completely plant-food diet, and (ethical) veganism as an ideal, and a major increase in people at various points on the journey. Ovo-lacto-vegetarianism has become just one of many routes. How many go 'all the way' will largely depend how easy it is for them, and circumstances do vary enormously, especially in different countries.

As Americans have always been more motivated by health, they have always had a stronger tradition of recognising that eggs/dairy are no better than meat in health terms, so have been more inclined towards a purely plant-food diet. Some, like Bill Clinton, occasionally add fish, but not eggs/dairy, giving a different route to the diet - but not necessarily vegan as they often exclude ethical values.

As concerns about global warming grew, it was obvious that dairy cows produce the same methane as beef cattle. This combined with higher profile arguments online about the ethical implications of male calves and chicks. The internet has made it possible to make more people aware of all this than it ever was in print.

Recent statistics suggest less than 1% of the UK population is vegan (some suggest 2% including those just adopting the plant-food diet). The latest USA survey gives 2% of 'self-defined' vegans - inevitably including dietary only. The US population is about 300 million (five times the UK) and, even with the high proportion of diet-only in the USA, there would still appear to be more genuine (ethical) vegans in the US than anywhere else.

There are now vegans, many of them organised, in most countries around the world, largely as a result of the spread of information through the internet, primarily from American websites.

What sort of conditions do vegetarianism and veganism need in order to flourish? This is an interesting question to ask as we plot the progress of vegetarian/vegan ideas throughout history. Obviously societies ravaged by war, or where even human rights are little respected, are not promising in this respect. A sympathetic religion (eg Buddhism) helps a lot, but are there other factors?

Most religions do not seem very sympathetic to veganism. In India vegans often get hostile receptions from some who see them as offending the sacred cow by refusing to drink milk.

There are several Christian vegetarian societies around the world, but I've never heard of a Christian vegan society, just individuals. Buddhism varies enormously in different countries, but again where it is sympathetic it tends to be lacto-veg. However, the Jewish Vegetarians of North America are strongly plant-food-only and, as I understand it, from an ethical basis.

Wars certainly have a hugely damaging impact. Before the First World War the vegetarian movement in Europe was almost as big as it is today, and with clear signs of moving towards veganism. The brutality of war seems to have destroyed most of the ethical values, and for millions it was just a case of eating anything they could get. Though ironically, research during both World Wars showed that the people were healthier when meat was rationed.

Despite all the setbacks, equal respect for all human life has been making slow but steady progress over the last 200

years. Maybe that was needed before respect for non-human animals could expand further.

The major recent growth factor has undoubtedly been ease of communications via the internet. Now isolated individuals can participate continuously in group discussions, and share information in any language. If a way of thinking is genuine then more and more will recognise it and come on board, provided they get to hear about it.

In recent years the IVU has reached out far more to the developing countries. Let's take one example, Africa, where you might not expect vegetarian ideas to flourish too much - yet you've said that "Africans are developing new ideas that have lessons for all of us to follow". Have you been surprised by the growth of interest in vegetarianism (and veganism?) in places with very different cultures like Africa, Latin America, and Asia?

We were frustrated for many years in trying to establish organised veg*ism in Africa and elsewhere. There were always some local groups but they drifted in and out of contact.

The key has always turned out to be finding one individual who can make things happen in the region. Progress in the developing world is only going to come from local people doing things in their own way. There is deep resentment to 'colonialism' and veg*n 'missionaries'. People in developing countries are perfectly capable of organising themselves, and they are more appreciative than the rich world of the benefits that come from mutual support.

IVU is now mostly led from the developing world. The chair of the International Council is in Brazil, with other prominent leaders in Indonesia, India, China, the Middle East and Africa - and almost all of them vegan. They are very good at sharing resources and helping each other in ways that Europeans and North Americans often seem to have forgotten.



Marching (with 'Be Vegan' banner) during a vegetarian congress in Ghana 2009

Looking forward now rather than back, one of the most interesting of your articles is the one on 'flexitarians and plantarians' (a plantarian, or simply plantarian, being someone who lives wholly on plant foods but may or may not share the ethical values of veganism).

You suggest that fewer younger people, especially in developed countries, are adopting a traditional lacto (or ovo lacto) vegetarian diet, and are either choosing a flexitarian diet (with some but not all meals vegetarian) or else, at the other end of the scale, they are opting for veganism. How do you see this heading in the future?

The surveys from the USA and the UK suggest a flat-line, or even a decline, in committed ovo-lacto-vegetarians over the

last 20 years, and an increase in those only eating plant foods (variously known as non-dairy-vegetarians, total-vegetarians, plantatarians etc).

Some surveys look at 'meat-reducers', increasingly known as flexitarians, and all seem to be showing huge increases in the number of people deliberately choosing some meat-free meals. The latest UK survey suggested 60% of the population now doing this.

There is now considerable debate about how the committed vegans should respond - do we simply reject anyone who is not a perfect vegan? Or do we actively promote the idea of meat reduction in the hope that the reduction will continue to eventual zero? Whatever approach vegan individuals or groups choose, all the signs are that the meat-reduction movement will continue to expand.

You've stated that veganism is not just about food, that it's an ethical position which rejects any use of animals - and that ideally a 'vegetarian' would be someone who just eats plants, while a 'vegan' would mean someone living an animal-respecting ethical lifestyle, which included a vegetarian diet.

But that change in terminology isn't of course likely to happen any time soon. You've argued that right now we're in need of a word between ovo lacto vegetarian and vegan, and various terms crop up in your articles such as pure or total vegetarian, and plantatarian/plantarian. Having all these terms can be confusing. Are any of them in wide use or likely to be?

Changing the common usage of words is not something any of us can control, especially as the meanings vary considerably in different countries. For me it is just a case of trying to provoke some discussion and see what happens. There are many other people with similar concerns, and promoting their own preferences. As always the internet is making it so much easier to do this, and potentially meanings could shift more quickly than was possible in the past.

'Flexitarian' is a good example of a word that took off very quickly. It will be interesting to see what happens over the next few years, if enough people join in then we could get some momentum going.



John Davis (2nd left) at an international veg fair in China in 2009. Susianto Tseng (IVU Asia-Pacific co-ordinator from Indonesia) is on the far left.

In Vegan Views 125 (p.8) Edward Immel wrote about the shifting meaning of the word 'vegan' and expressed concern that, especially in the USA, a number of people

are calling themselves vegan who really aren't, and that "veganism is being reduced to a plant-based diet and not a very consistent one". Do you share that concern, and is what is happening in the USA likely to happen in the UK and elsewhere too?

I think the problem was always there, just that there are a lot more people calling themselves 'vegan' now, especially in the USA. When the word 'vegan' was invented in the UK in 1944 it was specifically used to replace 'non-dairy-vegetarian', and really did just refer to food, even though the founders were all ethically motivated. The Vegan Society clarified its rules and definition in 1951, but by that time there was already another vegan society in California, from 1948, and the leaders of that appear to have been primarily health motivated. So some confusion was there right at the beginning.

I do share Edward Immel's concern but all we can do is keep raising the problem. There are some prominent Americans now deciding not to call themselves vegan, just referring to eating a 'plant-based diet' ('plant-strong' is going around too).

It is difficult for us to avoid misusing the word 'vegan' - for example we routinely state that all food at IVU events is vegan - but what we really mean is that it will all be plant food. If veganism is a set of ethical values then food cannot be vegan, it is just plants; only people can be ethical, so only people can be vegan.

One alternative is to move the label onto the meat-eaters, with terms such as 'carnist' and 'carnism' gaining interest. Some of us would prefer to promote the idea that we are the normal ones, and that those abusing animals in any way should be labelled, not us.

It seems that the number of committed and consistent vegetarians and vegans, although growing, is still relatively low. You've commented about personality types and you wrote that "It seems that only a small percentage of the population have the type of personality that prefers a total commitment to whatever cause they are promoting. It works the same in politics and religion as it does in veg*ism".

If that's right, what can we expect as time goes on? Would veganism have to become so easy (and cheap) for the public at large to embrace it? Perhaps it will have to be something like lab-grown or 'in vitro' meat that changes everything for the better, rather than ethics?

It could be just that meat becomes more expensive and less sustainable, especially as the developing world tries to copy the West. For many that could make plant-food a more attractive option than increasingly industrialised meat production, and we are seeing a significant increase in meat-eaters concerned about factory farming. If they all tried to change to free-range-organic meat it would be impossible to supply enough for seven billion people.

The various forms of fake meat are popular with the food industry because they can make more profit from any sort of processed food than they can from fresh fruit and vegetables. Potentially, fake meat is also more profitable than all the hassle of managing livestock; so, we are likely to see more and more of that being advertised.

As for lab-grown 'in vitro' flesh - personally I can't imagine wanting to eat it, but there are millions, even billions, of people who just want cheap meat and don't much care where it comes from. If lab flesh can be produced more cheaply and more profitably than factory farmed meat, then it could have a major impact on that sector of the market, so I wouldn't expect too much campaigning against it. Whether lab flesh is ever recognised as 'vegetarian/vegan' remains to be seen. Maybe

future generations might see it differently to the way most of us probably do today.

The food research for the NASA mission to send people to Mars is a good indication of one possible future - they are planning plant-food only. They might even begin to realise that it could work better on this planet too.



Vegan sales stall at the 2010 IVU congress in Indonesia

The 40th IVU International Vegetarian Congress will have taken place in the USA by the time this interview is published. What are your hopes for it?

Maybe we can send a review of the congress for your next issue. The main objective for IVU in California will be to raise awareness about world veg*ism amongst North Americans. We will have speakers from every continent in both San Francisco and Los Angeles, including leaders of several vegan societies. *[There are now reports and photos of the event up on John's blog at www.vegsources.com/john-davis]*

IVU now has 27 member organisations around the world with 'vegan' in their title. But common definitions of the word 'vegetarian' have always been 'with or without' eggs/dairy, and most organisations that call themselves 'vegetarian' these days are promoting the 'without' version.

The International Vegetarian Union is doing what it can to encourage this trend. We welcome anyone to our events, and accept any type of vegetarians as members and supporters, but we only promote plant-foods - vegetarians eat vegetation - and we support the full ethical values of veganism.



IVU congress in England 1947. Donald Watson, co-founder of the Vegan Society, is in the middle of the front row