

Almost all of us have been into one of McDonald's 'family restaurants' at one time or another. Many of us regularly find ourselves at the counter, delivering our order to the young smiling face at the console. But how many of us really eat that Big Mac with a completely clear conscience? Thoughts of burning rainforests, sugary food and underpaid employees lurk just underneath the surface of many of our minds. In 1994, two British Greenpeace activists tried to educate the public of the facts behind McDonald's fast-food chain, and the giant multinational didn't like it. The result: The longest civil court case in British history.

First, the facts about McDonald's as publicised by the organisation itself. McDonald's began in 1948 as a 'barbecue drive-in' owned by two brothers, Mac and Dick McDonald. In 1954, Ray Kroc obtained exclusive franchising rights from the brothers, opening his first restaurant in Illinois in 1955. He founded the company that is now McDonald's Corporation.

McDonald's have over 18,000 restaurants in 91 countries, with an annual turnover of a staggering \$29.9 billion as of last year — and growth is still of the order of 15% annually. Franchises can still be obtained, but you'll need about US \$75,000 of your own money to qualify financially. And according to the organisation themselves, 'McDonald's is absolutely committed to preserving and protecting the environment.' Most of McDonald's contribution to the environment centres around their packaging. 'Reduce, reuse, and recycle,' is an effective summary of their environmental policy. According to their own statistics, McDonald's in the U.S. is spending \$300 million on 133,000 tons of recycled packaging per year, including the components of the restaurants themselves.

This is all well and good. Certainly, for an organisation as large as McDonald's, using countless tons of paper products a year, this is a significant saving to the environment. But it is the least they can do. The issues over which the 'McLibel' case is being fought range much wider.

Helen Steel and Dave Morris were two Greenpeace activists who in the late 1980s and early 90s were involved in an anti-McDonald's campaign consisting of producing and distributing the fact sheet 'What's wrong with McDonald's?' The allegations levelled at the fast-food giant were diverse and far ranging, many of them undeniably serious; the status of employees, the environmental impact and the treatment of animals were all addressed. McDonald's decided that almost all of the criticisms contained in the short document were libellous, and immediately instituted proceedings against the pair. The case began on 28th June, 1994 and is set to continue until the end of this year. There have been nearly 300 days in court so far; the previous longest libel case in the UK was only 101 days long, and the longest civil case was 198 days. This is some indication of the quagmire the giant corporation has waded into.

Steel and Morris had no money and were not entitled to legal aid, so elected to defend themselves. Already at an enormous disadvantage — McDonald's having access to almost unlimited funds — the two were turned down in their application for a jury trial, as McDonald's alleged the issues involved were 'too complicated for the general public.' The burden then fell upon the two to prove that all the statements they had made were justifiable and provable, an enormous task in the face of the McDonald's legal onslaught.

In an interview given during the pre-trial hearings, David Morris outlined some of the difficulties an unwaged activist faced in Britain's legal system.

Are you intimidated by the opposition and the Courts?

'We were at first, partly because everything is so complex, and nobody ever explains all the procedures. At one hearing we asked the Judge to explain something, and he said that if we didn't understand then we should be represented by solicitors. He didn't tell us how we should pay for them!

'The Court deliberately mystifies all the procedures so that ordinary people don't stand a chance on their own. We were criticised for not being aware that when we exchanged witness statements they should include ones written by ourselves about our involvement, nobody had ever told us that we had to do this, we were just expected to know. The longer the case goes on the more determined we are not to give in even though it is extremely frustrating to be fighting McDonald's on their own terms in the courts, which are obviously there to protect the interests of the rich and powerful.'

The criticisms levelled at McDonald's in the factsheets are serious indeed; some of them difficult to prove, and certainly nothing any organisation would like to have to wear. The first issue addressed by the leaflet is the effect of McDonald's (and, of course, other organisations) on the Third World.

While millions of people are starving, vast areas of land in poor countries are used for cattle ranching or to grow grain to feed animals to be eaten in the West. McDonald's continually promote meat products, encouraging people to eat meat more often, which wastes more and more food resources. 145 million tons of grain fed to livestock produces only 21 million tons of meat and by-products.

They tell us that the greed of the rulers (often dictators) of poorer nations is exploited, so that corporations like McDonald's can buy the land and use it to raise beef. Similarly, these corporations are responsible for some countries exporting their crops as animal feed — leaving the children to starve.

Of the 145 million tons of grain and soy fed to livestock, only 21 million tons of meat and by-products are used. The waste is 124 million tons per year at a value of 20 billion US dollars. It has been calculated that this sum would feed, clothe and house the world's entire population for one year.



The Cost of a Mac Big

TM

This claim of economic imperialism and gross wastage is perhaps the most serious one levelled against McDonald's. It is also the most difficult to prove or disprove; the ownership of the land, the behaviour of the leaders of Third World nations and the responsibility of any particular corporation for the effects of these decisions cannot be pointed to with clear-cut accuracy. Nevertheless, the fact does remain that many poor countries are exporting food to the wealthy, usually out of economic necessity.

Another issue addressed in the leaflet is one which the general population is more familiar with. It is alleged that McDonald's is directly responsible for the destruction of the world's forests.

The world's most beautiful forests are being destroyed at an appalling rate by multinational companies. McDonald's have at last been forced to admit to using beef reared on ex-rainforest land, preventing the regeneration of forests. Also, the use of farmland by multinationals and their suppliers forces local people to move on to other areas and cut down further trees.

This is no news to many people — most of us are probably accustomed to some level of guilt. Statistics about the number of acres of rainforest destroyed every minute (fifty) are still shocking. McDonald's are obviously aware of this, because according to their own literature:

When it comes to protecting endangered tropical rain forests, McDonald's maintains a strict policy against buying any beef from rainforest lands. Any McDonald's supplier who deviates from this policy will be immediately discontinued.

Greenpeace does not accept this, however, and maintains that the destruction of vital natural resources such as the Amazon are due to our burger habit. Vast areas of forest are being cleared every day to make paper for the offices of the West and to clear land for raising beef. Furthermore, it is surprisingly alleged that the methane generated by so many cattle 'is a major cause of the 'global warming' crisis.'

The campaign against McDonald's also hits closer to home — your health. There would be few people indeed who would seriously maintain that fast-food hamburgers are a healthy part of the modern diet. The leaflet tells us

The reality is that it is high in fat, sugar and salt, and low in fibre and vitamins. A diet of this type is linked with a greater risk of heart disease, cancer, diabetes and other diseases.

McDonald's took particular exception to this statement. Although it is a medically accepted fact that certain dietary aspects will contribute to cancers of the breast and bowel, the food of any particular manufacturer cannot be realistically said to be directly responsible. However, McDonald's food is hardly prepared to be satisfying or healthy; high water content means it is minimally filling, and the high sugar and salt content serve only to make one thirsty.

The next criticism is one familiar to us all. McDonald's have an advertising budget in the thousands of millions of dollars, and most often their advertising is aimed squarely at children. This has been a very successful campaign in the past — Ronald McDonald is a character instantly recognisable to almost all of us, especially children. Kids love the colourful, circus-like atmosphere portrayed in the commercials and will drag their parents through the golden arches at any opportunity. The leaflet referred to this advertising as 'exploitation of children' — a serious allegation.