

Carnivorous Climate Skeptics in the Media

Conservative news outlets have downplayed ties between meat and global warming. Here's why they're wrong.

Story by James McWilliams

APRIL 26, 2010 | SPECIAL REPORT

Like *The Atlantic*? Subscribe to [The Atlantic Daily](#), our free weekday email newsletter.

Sign up

Earlier this month, the food news cycle took a spin for the better for carnivores concerned with the environmental impact of their diet. Fox News and the *Washington Times* offered the brightest rays of hope, introducing stories with the headlines "Eat Less Meat, Reduce Global Warming -- Or Not" and "Meat, dairy diet not tied to global warming." The *Daily Mail* followed suit, writing, "Veggies are wrong and eating less meat will NOT save the planet." Others just got uppity, writing headlines like, "Go Veggie to prevent warming? Bull."

As it turns out, the enthusiasm was premature: yet another tawdry example of the media either misreading or willfully distorting a study in order to indulge in another irresistible dose of sensationalism.

Some background. In 2006, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization released a pivotal report called "[Livestock's Long Shadow](#)." This extensive study presented a wealth of data supporting the claim that global livestock production accounted for 18 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions. To place their findings in perspective, the authors noted that this figure made livestock a greater contributor to global warming than the transportation sector. Needless to say, heads turned and jaws dropped.

[Advocates of reduced meat consumption](#) -- not to mention vegetarian and vegan interests -- were elated, quickly elevating this finding to the level of dogma. For a while, it was not uncommon to hear people saying that a meat-eating Prius driver has a [bigger carbon footprint](#) than a vegan Hummer driver.

But Dr. Frank Mitloehner, an animal scientist at UC-Davis, was skeptical -- especially when it came to the transportation comparison. With substantial funding from the Beef Checkoff Program, Mitloehner researched and wrote a peer-reviewed article called "Clearing the Air: Livestock's Contribution to Climate Change." In a talk delivered last month to the American Chemical Society, he drew upon this article to challenge the claim that livestock produce more greenhouse gas than transportation.

The authors of the FAO report, he revealed, took their transportation figure from the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The problem with doing this was that the FAO had applied a far more

comprehensive life-cycle analysis to animals than the IPCC had done to transportation, resulting in an overstatement of the effect of animal agriculture on global warming. The comparison of livestock and transportation, he argued, was essentially a comparison between apples and oranges.

A life-cycle analysis (LCA) is a stage-by-stage assessment of where energy is consumed (and greenhouse gases produced) in the production of a particular item. While invaluable in terms of improving energy efficiency, LCAs can vary wildly when it comes to comprehensiveness. When applied to livestock, a competent life-cycle analysis should at least examine the energy required to grow the grain to feed the cattle, to slaughter the animals and process the flesh into edible cuts, to refrigerate and transport the meat, and to dispose of the carcass. It should also measure bovine methane output and the carbon sequestration lost because of deforestation. The FAO was diligent in doing all this.

However, the IPCC, when it did its transportation lifecycle assessment, applied a much narrower focus (not because the IPCC is incompetent, but because the data is simply less available), thereby producing a smaller emissions figure. Responding to Mitloehner's charge, Pierre Gerber, a co-author of the FAO report, responded, "I must say that he has a point. We factored in everything for meat emissions, and we didn't do the same for transport, we just used the figure from the IPCC." This is a rare thing in the scientific community, by the way -- an *admission of error*.

On the grand scale of scientific errors, though, this one was relatively minor. What matters most is that the 18 percent figure -- and the corresponding implication that reduced meat consumption would lower global warming -- remained essentially untouched by Mitloehner's report. Mitloehner's only complaint about the cattle emissions numbers was that they obscured regional variation in livestock emissions. A South American country actively clearing rainforests to raise cattle will make a much greater contribution to the 18 percent figure than a country such as the United States, which is not clearing land for livestock. It's a good point. But Mitloehner's debunking of the transportation comparison changes nothing about the overall impact of livestock on the environment. "We stand entirely behind the 18 percent figure," Gerber told the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

It was in this context that incendiary headlines fell like bombs on unsuspecting vegetarians. None of these news "reports," however, took the time to effectively explore the 18 percent claim. Had they done so, they would have found not only that it went fundamentally unchallenged by Mitloehner, but that in November 2009 the Worldwatch Institute deemed the 18 percent figure to be a far too modest calculation (click [here](#) for a PDF of its report). Noting that the FAO study did not adequately account for the impact of livestock respiration on global warming, it pegged the livestock greenhouse gas figure at 51 percent.

No matter what the exact figure, the environmental case against industrial meat production remains powerfully convincing. But when news outlets distort studies to raise public doubt about the virtues of consuming less meat, it undermines the consumer's most direct and achievable forms of protest against industrial food. It takes away from us one of the most concrete actions we can take to do our personal part for Mother Nature. Nothing, not even the perverse pleasure of a sensationalistic headline, should justify doing that.

Connect 

MOST POPULAR

1 History’s Largest Mining Operation Is About to Begin
WIL S. HYLTON



2 The Miseducation of the American Boy
PEGGY ORENSTEIN



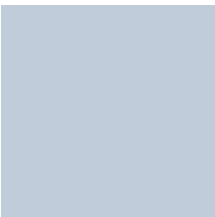
3 Cool It, Krugman
SEBASTIAN MALLABY



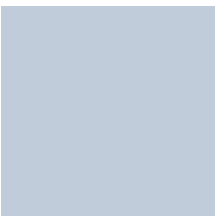
4 Trump’s Reelection Is Sitting on a Knife’s Edge
RONALD BROWNSTEIN



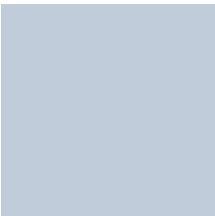
5 Donald Trump Made His Own Impeachment Inevitable
GEORGE T. CONWAY III



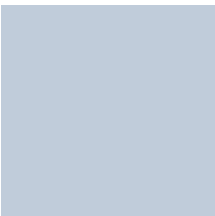
6 Photos of the Decade: 2010–19
ALAN TAYLOR



7 And Now Over to You, John Roberts
JANE CHONG



8 The Rise and Fall of an All-Star Crew of Jewel Thieves
GEOFF MANAUGH



9

A Stunning Vote Reversal in a Controversial First Amendment Case

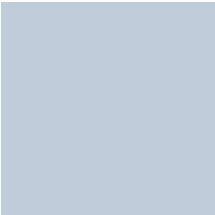
GARRETT EPPS



10

Impeachment Could End Badly

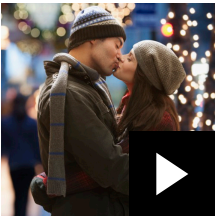
SHADI HAMID



VIDEOS

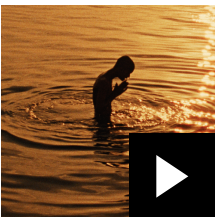
Why Dating Is Hard for Millennials

CATHERINE SPANGLER AND SOPHIA MYSZKOWSKI



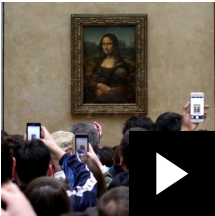
The Largest Gathering of Humans on the Planet

EMILY BUDER



Mass Tourism Is Destroying the Planet

CATHERINE SPANGLER , VISHAKHA DARBHA , AND JACKIE LAY



The Lost World of Transhumance

EMILY BUDER



SPONSOR CONTENT

Gifts Inspired by The Atlantic's 162-Year Legacy

PAYPAL



SPONSOR CONTENT

Gifts Inspired by The Atlantic's 162-Year Legacy

PAYPAL



Make your inbox more interesting.

Each weekday evening, get an overview of the day’s biggest news, along with fascinating ideas, images, and people. [See more newsletters](#)

Enter your email

Sign Up

Ideas that matter. Since 1857.

Subscribe and support 162 years of independent journalism. For less than \$1 a week.

SUBSCRIBE >

