

The Guardian

Want to have a real impact on climate change? Then become a vegetarian

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Millennials who care about the environment should put their money where their mouths are and stop eating meat



These cows don't know that they're destroying the environment. But they're cows. What's your excuse?
Photograph: Alamy

Between widespread economic disparities, population growth, unsustainable agriculture and climate change, a study partially funded by Nasa predicted that civilization as we know it could be steadily heading for a collapse within the next century - and the window to create impactful change is narrowing. That means millennials are potentially the last generation during which creating meaningful change is possible. But how do we accomplish this?

It's time to start a dietary revolution.

Millennials represent \$200bn in economic worth, and if a statistical majority of our generation become vegetarians or vegans, or at least eat significantly less meat than previous generations, we have a chance to have a real economic - and thus environmental - impact.

In 2012, there were roughly 70bn animals raised as livestock for 7.1bn people. And a study published in July by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences shows that livestock production is among the most destructive forces driving climate change: it degrades air quality, pollutes waterways, and is the single-largest use of land.

Precisely how much livestock contributes to climate change remains up for debate: studies show numbers ranging from 18% (a 2006 UN food report) to 51% (a 2009 World Watch study). Most other studies fall somewhere in that range but, in each of them, the advice is the same: humans need to eat less meat to curb climate change and resource scarcity.

Raising animals to eat produces more greenhouse gasses (via methane and nitrous oxide) than all of the carbon dioxide excreted by automobiles, boats, planes and trains in the world combined. Over a 20-year period, methane has 86 times more climate change potential than carbon dioxide, and nitrous oxide has 268 times more climate change potential, according to the 2006 UN report. Radically reducing the amount of methane and nitrous oxide in the atmosphere can produce discernable changes in the greenhouse gas effect within decades, while the same reductions in carbon dioxide take nearly a century.

Yes, quitting meat can reduce your carbon footprint significantly more than quitting driving.

Besides the methane and nitrous oxide released during livestock production, industrialized livestock contributes to roughly 75% of deforestation (to give animals grazing grounds and grow soybeans used in feedstock).

Raising cows, of course, has the biggest environmental impact. There are roughly 1.5bn cows raised as livestock, and they consume 45bn gallons of water and 135bn pounds of food every day, according to the documentary *Cowspiracy*. Comparatively, 7.1bn humans consume roughly 5.2bn gallons of water and 21bn pounds of food daily. To put this in digestible terms, producing the meat for a one-third pound hamburger patty as much as 18,000 gallons of water depending on the farming method, according to the US government.

In comparison to chickens and pigs, cows require 28 times more land, 11 times more water and cause five times more greenhouse gasses, according to a study led by Gidon Eshel of Bard College. Looking at foods commonly found in vegetarian and vegan diets, like potatoes, rice and wheat, his report finds that, per calorie of beef, cows require 160 times more land and produce 11 times more greenhouse gases.

The resources needed - and sacrificed - to raise livestock is ridiculous; we simply need to stop breeding so many animals for slaughter. You can take all kinds of other small steps to reduce your environmental footprint: commuting to work by biking or walking, monitoring electricity usage by installing energy-efficient appliances, using less water via low-flow faucets and toilets, buying from environmentally-conscious companies - but researchers argue that none of that on its own will be enough to reverse climate change. If you really want to make a

difference, then look at what's on your plate.

As Albert Einstein said, "Nothing will benefit human health and increase the chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet." If you're not willing to go vegetarian or vegan, even just significantly reducing the amount of meat in your diet can have an impact: for instance, instead of adhering to "meatless Mondays", make it "meaty Mondays", when Monday is the only day that you eat even a small portion of meat.

Putting this off for another generation - the way our parents have - just isn't feasible. Millennials have the opportunity to use our economic power and personal choices to effect real change, and it's our responsibility to do so.

Besides, if we don't stop and reverse climate change, all we'll have left to eat - if we're lucky - is fish. Whoops - looks like we're running out of fish, too.

This article was amended on 4 August 2014 to reflect Nasa's relationship to the study more clearly.

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