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Home » News

## World leaders 'have moral obligation to go vegan'

Matthew Glover | 21st February 2019



Are those in positions of power doing enough to protect our

planet, and should they be encouraging everyone to go vegan?

**M**any of our world leaders have remained almost silent about the UN warning that we have just 12 years to halt a climate catastrophe. That's why the [Million Dollar Vegan](#) campaign offered \$1m to charity if Pope Francis chooses to eat only plant-based foods during Lent, and encourages Catholics around the world to do the same.

The campaign has so far attracted more than 500 media articles in more than 40 countries, but this is no PR stunt. It is a carefully calculated campaign to get the world talking about the ecological breakdown that is underway, and to urge world leaders to step up to the plate.

Although climate change is regularly reported on, political leaders are all too often complacent or complicit, while environmental groups tend to focus their firepower on lobbying governments over fossil fuels and clean energy, while failing to empower

individuals to take meaningful action in their own lives. Turning off lights and switching to a green energy tariff will only achieve so much.

## **Global farmland**

We need greater ambitions. And so we must appeal directly to world leaders to take action. That's why the Million Dollar Vegan campaign approached a leader who is not bound by party political factions or short-term strategies designed to shore up support for the next election.

The campaign instead transcends nationalities and provides a global approach, which is why it made a plea to Pope Francis, the head of the 1.2 billion-strong Catholic Church.

We know Pope Francis cares. In his [encyclical letter in 2015](#), he wrote at length about the environment, climate change, deforestation, loss of wildlife and man's tyrannical use of animals. What he didn't mention – and what he may not know – is that animal agriculture underpins and drives this destruction.

Animal farming is [a key driver of climate change](#), creating more emissions than the fuel from every car, bus, ship, plane and train on the planet. According to environmental researcher at University of Oxford, Joseph Poore, by choosing a plant-based diet, we each reduce our emissions by 15 per cent, which is not insignificant, but that figure increases dramatically over the longer term.

This is because it takes a lot less land to produce plant foods than animal products. In fact, 83 per cent of global farmland is used to produce animal products, but it provides just 18 per cent of our calories. It's incredibly wasteful of the Earth's resources.

## **Intensive agriculture**

If we ate only plant foods, Poore estimates that we would need 75 per cent less land, which would be returned to nature. As trees regrow, they will take carbon out of the atmosphere and reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by [30 to 50](#) per cent. Poore said: "As a solution, diet change is incredibly powerful."

Because creating animal products requires so much land, animal farming is a [leading driver of deforestation](#). Ancient forests are razed to the ground largely to make way for grazing or to grow feed for farmed animals, and the wild animals who lived there are killed or displaced.

It's easy to think of these losses as historic and yet in the last 15 years, we have lost tropical forests the size of the UK, France, Germany, Spain and Portugal. And in the last 50 years, around [60 per cent](#) of all animal populations have been wiped off the face of the

Earth. Farming – particularly animal farming – is one of the leading causes.

With the loss of habitat and animals comes the loss of whole species. Our meat-centric diets are driving them to extinction. It is so serious that scientists say the **sixth mass extinction** is underway. But this is the first mass extinction to be caused by a species – and it is us.

Extinction is not solely a problem for people in other lands. In the UK, one-fifth of all wild mammals are at high risk of extinction, with some species like the wildcat and the black rat already on the brink. Birds, hedgehogs, bees and other pollinators are all in decline, with intensive agriculture cited as a key driver.

### **Walking the walk**

Moreover, animal agriculture is a key polluter of air, land and waterways. There are billions of farmed animals on the planet, producing gargantuan quantities of waste. It's too much to be absorbed by the land as fertiliser and so slurry is stored in tanks and lagoons, from which it all too often leaks out, threatening drinking supplies and causing widespread destruction to aquatic wildlife.

Slurry – as well as industrial fertilisers – is responsible for killing whole areas of the ocean, which are known as 'dead zones' because no animal can survive there. Producing food for a vegan population reduces nitrogen and phosphorous pollution by about 50 per cent, according to Poore.

For all these reasons, he said: “**Going vegan is the most powerful change** most people can make in their lives to reduce their environmental impact.”

It is absolutely clear that individuals can make a real difference, which the Million Dollar Vegan campaign wholeheartedly wishes to inspire, but we need more. That's why our aim is to force change at institutional level.

While we appreciate the concern shown by Pope Francis towards these serious ecological issues, we desperately need institutions like the Catholic Church to start walking the walk, not just talking the talk.

### **Education campaigns**

At institutional level, we can make huge and sweeping changes to defend the living planet in a much shorter timeframe. We have a chance to limit the devastating impacts of climate change and preserve species under threat.

Each person that eats vegan for Lent will save emissions equivalent to a flight from

London to Berlin, and if every Catholic on the planet takes part, it will be equivalent to the whole of the Philippines not emitting CO2 for a year. Now, just imagine if they stayed vegan.

Of course, this is not the sole responsibility of Pope Francis and the Catholic Church, and us as individuals – businesses must also be pressed to act. Retailers should be creating and promoting more and better plant-based foods.

Vegan meals should be the default in work canteens, in schools, and on flights. Poore's research has shown that the environmental impact of animal foods is almost always **larger** than that of plant foods, and that the most sustainable dairy is still worse for the planet than the least sustainable soya milk. Environmental impact labelling on food products is needed to help people make better choices.

And of course, governments must act through state-sponsored education campaigns, ending subsidies for animal agriculture, and taxing the products that cause the most harm.

There is much to be done. But it must be done, not just for the sake of our common home – though that should be reason enough – but also to protect people from the devastating impacts of antibiotic resistance that is driven by animal agriculture, and because imprisoning animals in squalid conditions, taking their young, their milk and their lives is utterly inhumane. I like to think that human nature is better than this.

And so Million Dollar Vegan will lobby institutions to try to kick-start these desperately needed actions, because world leaders do have a moral obligation to go vegan, and to encourage all to follow. But there is no time to lose, and each of us can make a difference every day with every meal we eat.

### **This Author**

*Matthew Glover founded the Veganuary campaign, which has seen more than 500,000 people go vegan for January. He now aims to magnify his impact and create global change through Million Dollar Vegan. @1mdollarvegan. The free Vegan Starter Kit available at [www.milliondollarvegan.com](http://www.milliondollarvegan.com) is a great place for each of us to start.*

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