



Observations

Why Do Some Green Activists Eat Meat?

Saying you care about the environment a bit is hollow if you're not ready to change your diet

By Dylan Moon on May 21, 2019



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It was clear in 2015 that the Paris Agreement on climate change needed a rulebook to help countries meet their obligations under the accord. When diplomats crowded Katowice, Poland, last December to draft this rulebook, they ate like kings. The menu sported beef with smoked bacon, pork and beef dumplings, pork tenderloin, codfish in butter-wine sauce with mussels, barbecue chicken, burgers and assorted cheeses.

Amnesty International's yearly conference is the same story. Aspiring defenders of humanity celebrate with ornate meat dishes on silver platters. I attended a workshop at this year's conference titled "Humanity at Risk." To Amnesty, climate change is a human

rights issue since it creates food and water shortages and threatens vulnerable communities. One expert spoke about the importance of clean energy and transportation. But when asked about the impact of animal agriculture, she deflected the question, calling diet a “personal choice” and therefore not a focus of her work.

In school, too, I have listened to one climate change presentation after another. All manage to ignore that 14.5 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions come from animal agriculture. That includes direct emissions from livestock, feed production and processing, and manure processing and disposal. This quantity exceeds all combined emissions from transport.

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They also ignore that about a third of all our freshwater consumption is through animal agriculture, and that plant-based foods are dozens of times more water-efficient. They

ignore that beef is the single largest driver of deforestation worldwide, followed by soy, half of which we feed to livestock. They ignore the toxic runoff from these farms, its creation of vast ocean dead zones and the desertification of once-fertile land.

They offer recommendations for daily activities: take shorter showers, use alternate forms of transport, eat local foods to avoid shipping. They ignore that a 10-minute shower takes about 20 gallons of water, whereas a single egg takes over 50 gallons to produce. A pound of chicken takes about 500 gallons. A gallon of milk 900. A pound of beef 1,800. You could shower for seven hours straight and use less water than it takes to make a single eight-ounce burger—without cheese.

They lament humanity's progress on climate goals, America's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the destructive power of corporations and their cargo ships. They do not mention, though, that the average American eats 200 pounds of meat per year, four times the world average, and that 97 percent of Americans consume animal products regularly. They ignore the worldwide consequences of feeding, raising and slaughtering 56 billion animals per year, not counting trillions of fish. And they ignore the fact that the global demand for meat and milk will keep rising, increasing 73 percent and 58 percent by 2050.

I want to ask the diplomats who drafted the Paris Agreement rulebook if they understood the irony. Over that 12-day conference, the food court had a carbon footprint of 4,500 metric tons, roughly that of burning half a million gallons of gasoline.

I wanted to ask Amnesty's climate expert, too, what battle are you fighting? If food scarcity is a human rights issue, why ignore that we lose 97 percent of the protein we feed cows, and that milk and eggs are hardly better at 70 percent of protein wasted? Food waste and emissions aside, high-protein plants like legumes improve soil health for sustained food production, and are adaptable to varying climates.



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Models show that if the U.S. transitioned to a legume-based diet, it could healthily feed 190 million more people using the same land area. And if Amnesty fights for quality of life improvements elsewhere, why also not mention the fecal miasma that envelopes towns near pork and beef farms, as farmers dispose of animal waste in mist?

For a climate activist, ignoring livestock is like trying to contain a fire without permitting yourself the use of water. The same goes for environment lovers. If you say you care for the environment, one should expect to find you among the 3 percent of Americans that have boycotted animal agriculture, right?

No? Why not?



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I want to say it's the ag-gag laws, which in several states intend to hide livestock farm operations from the public. I want to say it's the government subsidies that mask the true cost of animal products. I want to say it's the corporations that have crafted the image of

healthful beef and chicken-heavy diets. I want to regurgitate every fact I heard in the film *Cowspiracy* about the armor-plated empire forged by Tyson Foods, JBS, Cargill and other corporations. I want to say that if people just knew better, they would eat more plants.

But when 15,364 scientists advocated for plant-based diets by signing the 2017 “*World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice*,” vegetarianism in the U.S. didn’t budge. Despite movies like *Food, Inc.* and *Cowspiracy*, and despite countless academic papers on the harmful impact of animal agriculture, and despite ever more meat substitutes, veganism has risen only a few percent since 2012.

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In fact, when I mention the climate impact of meat, I often hear a sharp response. “I’ve heard all the vegan facts,” as if I were beating a dead horse. Shortly thereafter, as every vegan has probably heard, come the words, “I could never be vegan.” Or even worse, “I just

don't care.”

Ask many of these people their thoughts on transport, coal and gas-belching factories and you would get a different impression. You would see them as environmentally conscious and genuinely concerned. “We are the ones who will bear the brunt of climate change,” I often hear students my age say. Even regarding the treatment of animals: ask their opinions on SeaWorld, animal testing and poaching, and you'd think they wouldn't hurt a fly.

Somewhere in our reasoning about climate change, logic ends. Sure, it is deeply cultural. We are taught from youth that meat makes the dish. But at a certain point, it just becomes ironic. It is ironic that world leaders, questing to save humanity from climate disaster, indulge in beef tenderloin. It is ironic that a climate expert would refuse to acknowledge a leading cause of climate change. It is ironic that when thousands of experts do expose the destruction caused by livestock, no one cares. It is ironic that environmental engineers at my school recoil from vegan baked goods. It is ironic that our dining hall is armed with posters on sustainability and food waste yet serves meat six days a week.

This is the part of the article where I should offer a solution, a way out of our predicament, or words of hope. But having been vegan for a few years, I am too jaded for that.

The best I can say is that you don't have to be vegan to make a difference. Any reduced meat intake helps. In terms of emissions, if Americans ate even a mere hundred pounds of meat per year, it would be the equivalent of 26 million people switching exclusively to bicycle transportation.



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I could direct you to videos of the rape and slaughter of animals, of feces mist covering communities, and of arid, trampled land that used to host abundant life. I could also mention that, in affluent countries like the U.S., we consume far more protein than is necessary for good health. You can even be a vegan bodybuilder.

But until climate change no longer seems abstract to us, and maybe even then, the odds of you going vegan from reading this article are next to none. You might, though, as a classmate said after hearing what you just read, go for chicken lo mein tonight instead of beef.

If you do decide to avoid meat, you will have made progress in logical consistency. You will be able to back your claims of environmental awareness with a level of action. You might even understand that people don't go vegan to "feign moral superiority."

Just remember to get enough protein and vitamins. Missing those can really get you down.

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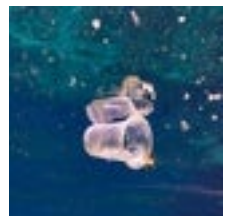
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