

## Should we give up our cars or our steaks?

Along with the Americans, Europeans are the largest consumers of animal proteins in the world. The British alone devour about 78 kg of meat per person a year, while the global average is about 35 kg per annum. However, what people generally do not realise is that nearly half the global cereal harvest and three quarters of all soy produced is consumed by livestock, and that a mere 15% of the protein in these crops will ever reach human mouths. The remaining 85% is wasted since it is first fed to animals for meat production. Indeed, it is converted into ammonia and other nitrogen compounds, which pollute our air, water and soil. Meat consumption thus has a tremendous impact on our environment, our health, the world's freshwater supply, biodiversity and our climate. In 2006, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) calculated that 18 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions are caused by livestock. In comparison, the emissions from the global transport sector do not exceed 13%. Our steaks thus make a greater contribution to global warming than all of our cars, planes and trains.

This is why the Nicolaas G. Pierson Foundation, in collaboration with the VU University in Amsterdam, decided to conduct research into the relationship between meat consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. The results of this research have been presented in the documentary *Meat the Truth* and in a report, which provides a detailed calculation of how meat consumption in the UK contributes to climate change.

Eating meat produces a net contribution of 1500 kg to the emission of carbon dioxide for each UK citizen; that is 91 million tonnes annually for all British people. This is the equivalent of driving 306 billion miles in a car. If all British people ate no meat for six days a week, this would have the same effect as taking all 29 million private cars off the UK roads. In other words, meat consumption and car use are responsible for an equivalent degree of climate damage.

This is why it is more than justified to ask why European governments appear to have completely ignored the issue of meat consumption, instead choosing to devote themselves to counteracting climate change by focusing on improving the environmental performance of cars, promoting the use of low-energy light bulbs and more energy efficient apparatus. A reduction in meat consumption could also lead to great advances in the fight against deforestation, water shortages and poverty. Indeed, imposing a tax on meat may well have a more beneficial impact on the environment than levying a mileage tax on car owners.

Meat consumption - and the environmental pollution with which it is associated - warrants serious attention from any government that professes to want to reduce the emission of greenhouse gasses. Just one day without meat would save as many greenhouse gas emissions as would be realised by replacing one billion light bulbs with low-energy ones. If all British citizens abstained from eating meat for two days a week, it would have the same effect on greenhouse gas emissions as cancelling 73 million return trips from London to Ibiza.

If people dared to raise their level of ambition just a little higher and decided to refrain from eating meat for three days a week, then this would save just as much as if the entire population switched to using a more energy-efficient refrigerator and freezer, an efficient washing machine, an efficient dishwasher, an efficient tumble-dryer, installing double-glazing in all homes, everyone using a high efficiency condensing boiler and insulating the facades of all homes in the UK: 38 million tonnes in total.

In actual fact, if everyone went without meat for just three days, this would be enough

to achieve the climate goals that have been set for private households in the UK in 2020 (a total reduction of 36 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>). Would this not be a fantastic opportunity to create an inspirational governmental campaign to combat global warming? At five days without meat we could reach carbon savings of an equivalent of the electricity use of all UK households (57 million tonnes).

Gains could also be made in other areas. According to the World Watch Institute, the production of just one kilo of red meat requires 100,000 litres of water. That is just as much water as is needed to shower daily for two years. On average, six times more land is used for the production of animal proteins than for the production of plant proteins. 80% of all agricultural land is used for pasture or producing feed for animals, while less than 2% is used for the production of biofuels. The current global food crises and the 850 million people who today suffer from hunger are thus in part a consequence of Western-style meat consumption. This is not to mention the risks to human health that are posed by zoonotic diseases, such as avian influenza. The latter is strongly related to intensive livestock production in South East Asia, and the conditions under which animals are forced to live in the intensive livestock sector.

Current attempts to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions caused by the livestock industry mainly seek to treat the symptoms, rather than the root cause. For instance, low-emission stalls are currently being developed to capture the methane; the upshot being that even more cattle will soon be kept permanently indoors. A pill as large as a man's fist is also being developed to reduce the methane belches and farts of cattle. It would seem more obvious to simply promote a more plant-based human diet, but apparently questioning what we should be putting on our plates is more taboo than simply modifying animals to suit our needs. Nonetheless, a reduction in our consumption of animal proteins will become inevitable if we are to effectively tackle the climate problem. To a large extent, the solution to the climate problem can be found on our very own plates.

What we dish up can make a real contribution. Meat is wasted energy, wasted water and wasted biodiversity!

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Note:

The report can be downloaded at [www.meatthetruth.com](http://www.meatthetruth.com)

This article converts all greenhouse gasses into CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents.

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