

Eating Our Way to Conservation

As the Green Gettysburg Book Club completes our study of *The Climate Book*, edited by Greta Thunberg, we just read a straightforward essay about the connection between our diet and protecting the environment. By changing our food consumption to line up more closely with standard health guidelines, we can reduce humanity's food-related environmental damage by 50 to 70 percent. In the Western World this change can really help, because our current diet relies so heavily on red meat. And producing red meat increases greenhouse gases enormously, as compared to producing food from poultry, fish, and plants, which are also healthier for us to eat.

Nearly everyone can improve our diet, as part of our conservation effort. You may have already been eating two vegetarian dinners a week, as we have. We started this change after learning that if all Americans ate two vegetarian dinners a week, there would be enough food produced to feed the world. Now, we find that eating a few more vegetarian meals a week also reduces the amount of greenhouse gas emissions that it takes to produce our food. So, we can help the climate by doing a little better with our diet, even if we do not plan to become vegetarian. In my case, the fact that I have lunchmeat in my sandwiches daily is a type of meat consumption I had not previously considered, when counting my carbon footprint. Even just by switching that lunchmeat to chicken or turkey instead of red meat, I can help. Having ratatouille or a tasty meatless chili two or three nights a week, and shifting to fish for another meal, helps too.

Michael Clark explains how in his essay, "The Calorie Question," chapter 4.12 of *The Climate Book*. Surprisingly, 30% of the greenhouse gas emissions that are damaging our planet come from our food systems. Food systems use 70% of the fresh water consumed yearly on Earth. And agriculture occupies 40% of the land surface of the planet, and is a leading driver of biodiversity loss. There is tragic deforestation in the Amazon, where the lungs of planet Earth are being damaged, because more and more trees are cut down to make room for the soybean crops that are used by cattle ranchers, to produce more and more red meat.

The lowest impact on the environment comes from eating a plant-based diet. Next best are dairy, poultry, pork, and fish, though these foods have five to twenty times the environmental impact of food from plants. Worst are cattle, goats, and sheep. Food from these animals has between twenty and one hundred times the negative impact on the environment of plant-based foods.

It's true that even plant-based foods require resources to produce. And some, such as the almonds that are grown in huge quantities in water-stressed California, create environmental damage unheard of for humble vegetables and rice, by draining scarce water resources. But a diet heavily relying on red meats comes at the highest cost, both for the earth and for our health. So reducing our daily consumption of red meat, and relying more on those healthy fruits and vegetables in that food pyramid, is a way to help the planet, as well as our health. Enjoy a lovely Adams County apple, as we eat our way to conservation.

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