

New Study Shows Major Environmental Impact of Meat Consumption

ECO-LIVING Americans eat more meat than almost anyone else in the world. However, meat has a more damaging impact on the environment than any other food we consume.



KNOW THE CONSEQUENCE: Climate science shows that the growth of the meat industry affects the health of the whole planet.

This week, world leaders will gather at United Nations headquarters in New York for a special Climate Summit called by Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. He intends to press nations to commit to lessen the effects of climate change in advance of the major summit planned for late 2015, where a climate agreement is expected to be signed.

Tracing your carbon footprint

For most of us, it is difficult to relate our daily actions to the global state of the climate, yet the world's ability to prevent greater climate instability depends on each of us. There are steps that every individual can take, and indeed must take, if we are to ensure a future for our children and grandchildren.

Perhaps the most important action we can take is to reduce meat consumption. The head of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Nobel-Prize-winner Dr. Rajendra Pachauri, has asked people to "please eat less meat – meat is very a carbon-intensive commodity."

According to UN scientific studies, animal food production accounts for 51 percent of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, surpassing transportation and electricity generation. Public perception is that coal plants, automobiles and industry are the major contributors. For sure, they do their part, but meat is a much bigger generator of the greenhouse gasses that are the leading cause of ozone depletion, which effects long-term climate change.

"Animal food production accounts for 51 percent of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, surpassing transportation and electricity generation."

A growing concern

Last month, researchers at Cambridge and Aberdeen Universities projected that if meat consumption continues at current rates, greenhouse gas emissions will increase 80 percent in the next

few years. Just one action, the reduction of meat consumption, could spare our children much suffering from severe droughts, intense storms, and other impacts. Individuals may have little control over policies regulating power plant emissions, but we do have total control over our diets. It is heartening to know that we truly can make a difference.

Eat sparingly

This does not mean that we must become vegetarian or vegan, but does mean including more meatless meals in our diet, relying more on plant protein, which is healthier. For years, medical science has told us that eating more fruits and vegetables and less meat will reduce the likelihood of developing cardiovascular disease, but until now, diet was a matter of personal health only. Climate science shows that the growth of the meat industry affects the health of the whole planet. While many of us might be willing to take risks when it comes to our health, are we willing to risk the health of our planet?

In 2013, a staggering 9.1 billion animals were slaughtered in the U.S. for a food industry that is kept afloat with taxpayer dollars. That's 24.9 million animals killed every day, one million, thirty-nine thousand animals killed every hour, to feed Americans' growing meat habit. This far exceeds the amount of meat consumed by our parents and grandparents, who considered meat to be a luxury, to be eaten perhaps a few times a week. Industrial production turned meat into a readily available commodity, causing many of us to forget what is entailed. It has also caused us to forget exactly how many resources go into making meat. If every one of us skipped just one serving of chicken per week, the carbon dioxide savings would be the equivalent of taking more than half a million cars off US roads.

"Climate science shows that the growth of the meat industry affects the health of the whole planet. While many of us might be willing to take risks when it comes to our health, are we willing to risk the health of our planet?"

Beyond dietary changes

There are other ways that each of us can care for our planet's health. Over past decades, manufacturers have introduced tens of thousands of chemicals into the environment, most of which are untested and unregulated. The European Environmental Agency estimates that there are anywhere from 20,000 to 70,000 different chemicals in use; little is known about the toxicity of 75 percent of them. They are everywhere, not just in our food, but in our furniture, carpeting, food containers and nearly everywhere we look. We can become more conscious of our living environments, choosing products with fewer untested chemicals.

This is particularly true when it comes to food choices. A recent study found that a conventionally grown cucumber contains over 35 different pesticides. Agricultural chemicals, fertilizers and pesticides don't just remain in the places where they are sprayed. They are spread by the wind and seep into the ground water, making their way into rivers and streams and eventually emptying into the ocean, creating dead zones where no life survives. These dead zones are growing, threatening ocean life and reducing the availability of fresh fish.

Consumers have great power. Vegan and vegetarian diet options are not only part of a healthy, sustainable lifestyle, but also act as a viable way to fight climate change. We need only heightened awareness of the impact of our choices on the climate and the health of our environment. Ignorance is the source of suffering, so we need to take individual responsibility for our choices, making

them compassionate and caring. By reducing our consumption of meat and avoiding foods and products treated with chemicals we may benefit our own health, but we can feel doubly good about it, as we will be helping save our planet at the same time.

<http://www.climatechangeadvocacy.com/eco-living/new-study-shows-the-major-environmental-impact-of-meat-consumption>