

Cowspiracy – Now on Netflix!

By Alison Homewood



Marc Dalmulder

Streaming giant Netflix recently launched *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret*, a 90-minute documentary financed via the crowd-funding site Indiegogo and executive-produced by Hollywood star Leonardo di Caprio. It is the latest in a short line of factual features promoted by Netflix, which was prompted to make this acquisition by the huge number of people keying the title into its search box.

Since its internet release last August, the film has been triggering major behavioral change among young adults, an age group often labeled as apolitical and apathetic. As friends and Facebook contacts recommend the film, young people watch it and by the time the end credits roll, they have resolved to become vegans or vegetarians.

‘My friend Rob told me I had to see it as he knows how I feel about the terrifying loss of wildlife and habitats,’ said Matt Bidault, a 23-year-old British student who recently moved to Copenhagen to do a masters in climate change.

‘The film is so convincing, well-researched and shocking that I knew instantly I couldn’t ever eat meat or dairy products again. As an environmentalist, to be anything but vegan seems hypocritical.’

On his first day in Denmark, Matt met three other vegans, all ‘turned’ by watching the doc. ‘You come away from it feeling totally enlightened.’

Martijn Visser, a 22-year-old Dutch masters student, says ‘what shocked me is, they’re facts that you kind of know but never expected to be so big, unbelievable.’

Conversations about food among young adults are starting to follow the same course: if someone says they have become vegetarian or vegan, people reply, ‘*Cowspiracy?*’, and nod knowingly.

The *Cowspiracy* Facebook page has 67,000 likes; both it and the video-sharing site Vimeo carry comments from around the world, with a good number declaring an instant conversion to veganism.

So what’s at the root of the revolution? *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* was produced and directed by Californians Kip Anderson and Keegan Kuhn. The pair resorted to raising finance through crowd-funding, after their original backer pulled out.

Their original goal of \$54,000 was over-pledged by 217%, with 1,449 people investing \$117,092 in just one month. This extra funding allowed them to dub it into Spanish and German and subtitle it into more than 10 other languages, including Chinese and Russian.

Cowspiracy’s thrust is that agriculture is the most destructive industry in the world today, responsible for global warming, deforestation, droughts, murders of land activists – you name it, it all comes back to cows.

Anderson drew on research from recent scientific reports published by such august organizations as the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Worldwatch Institute and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Viewers are fed alarming facts at a fast and furious rate: livestock and their by-products account for 51% of all worldwide greenhouse gas emissions; animal agriculture is responsible for around 90% of Amazon destruction; 70 billion farmed animals are reared annually worldwide and more than 6 million animals are killed for food every hour. And 1,100 activists have been killed in land disputes in Brazil during the past 20 years.

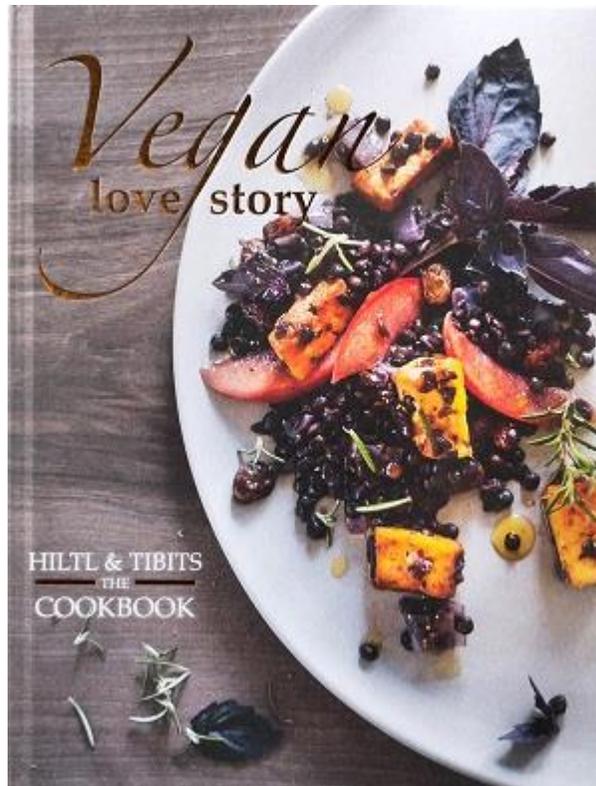
Cowspiracy's unique selling point is Anderson himself. An easy-going, regular guy in a baseball cap, he sets out on an investigative road-trip accompanied by Kuhn, keeping it real with a single camera.

In their sights are the environmental charities that are spending millions taking to task fossil-fuel and aviation companies, mining and logging giants, palm oil and paper producers, but that never mention – let alone challenge – the global agriculture industry.

Rainforest Action Network, Oceana, Sierra Club, Amazon Watch – their executive directors squirm and waffle nervously under Anderson's polite, persistent questioning, until they all reluctantly admit the culpability of global farming. Greenpeace comes off worst, refusing Anderson's requests for interviews over and over in embarrassingly awkward PR jargon.

'I was especially shocked by the power that the meat industry has to silence all big environmental organizations,' said Visser.

The film is laugh-out-loud funny in places, mainly due to politicians and senior executives being backed into corners of their own making. It's also look-away-gory as Anderson witnesses at close quarters a cow being brutally loaded onto a bulldozer for slaughter, and a sustainably-reared duck being bloodily beheaded by a blunt axe.



A Vegan Love Story presents 80 recipes with influences from all over the world, beautiful photography and information about some of the key ingredients in vegan cuisine.

The facts and stats underpinning the movie avoid the eco-yawn trap through jolly animation sequences: one acre of rainforest being cut down per second is shown as football fields replacing the trees, and the 660 gallons of water it takes to produce one beef-burger spring as a flood emitted from a man's garden hose.

Cowspiracy's strong narrative has a thriller-like quality when Anderson starts to realize the formidable adversary that is the US agricultural industry – and that of Brazil too, where people who stand up to ranchers tend to end up dead.

Howard Lyman, an erudite ex-rancher who spent 2 years fighting lawsuits after speaking against the beef industry on the Oprah Winfrey show, leaves the duo in no doubt about what they are taking on. The withdrawal of their financial backer seems like the last straw.

But Anderson decides, in a messianic way, that he has to keep going for the sake of the planet. Throughout the documentary, his assertions are never challenged – which is a weakness – but the quality of the interviews and the range of environmental subjects debunked – from sustainable fishing to fracking to organic

farming – coupled with the seemingly solid statistics, enable him to get away with it.

The film crescendos to an optimistic end, hailing the positive benefits of veganism – which is why so many young people come away from it promising to eschew meat, fish and dairy forever. And the evangelizing doesn't stop there.

All over the internet, there are stories of teenagers forcing their parents to watch it, and of whole families turning vegan, or at least vegetarian, as a result. Committed carnivores admit to avoiding it in case it puts them off eating meat.

Anderson acknowledges: 'It's happening actually really, really fast. I think it's just the fact that people didn't know how much their diet does affect everything. And once you do know, you can never not know it. The film has been around for about a year, and it's unbelievable the thousands of stories we've heard of people changing their diets after they know the truth.'

An absolutist position, perhaps, but one cannot deny the courage and persistence of the pair in shining a light on the murky complicity between politicians and the agricultural and fishing industries, and the cowardly impotence of the NGOs.

Di Caprio's involvement in the updated Netflix version reinforces *Cowspiracy's* environmental credentials as well as upping its 'cool' quotient.

Ian Harper, a 22-year-old political philosophy student in Barcelona, said: 'It's hopeful: there's an "obvious solution" to climate change which individuals can adopt right now.'

Matt Bidault concurs: 'The film offers the viewer an alternative lifestyle where you feel completely selfless.'

And therein lies the secret of *Cowspiracy's* appeal, especially to the disenfranchised, idealistic young.

With causes for climate change, pollution, loss of habitat, species decline and other environmental problems in the hands of self-serving governments and multinational corporations, the idea that you can start changing the world NOW,

by simply deciding to change your diet, is compelling and liberating.

Cowspiracy's Indiegogo pitch document states: 'Together, we aren't just creating a movie, we are creating a movement.' Right now, that movement seems to be on a roll.