

A Good Diet: what we should be eating now

What is a good diet? At its most basic, it is one which sustains life. But there is so much more to it than that.

Here are some questions whose answers might help us determine what constitutes a good diet here and now.

What is the impact of our diet on the climate?

What is its social impact?

What about the impact of meat eating on the animals?

What's my fair share of the global food supply?

1 Impact of our diet on the climate

In the summer of 2019, many of us were horrified by the fires raging in the Amazon. These are not accidents. Deforestation of the Amazon rainforest is a deliberate policy of the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, and although the attention of the world's media has moved elsewhere, the Amazon is still burning. Deforestation by burning not only contributes to carbon emissions in itself, but the reason for it is to fuel the world's desire for meat. The clearances are for meat production, either directly (farming of beef) or through the introduction of farming of soya for animal feed. 90% of global soya production is fed to livestock (cows, pigs, chickens) which is then fed to us. Meat eating is thus directly linked to the destruction of the Amazon rain forest.¹

The rain forests of the Philippines have also been largely destroyed. "When Ferdinand Magellan "rediscovered" the Philippines in 1521, forests blanketed 95% of the country. When the Ormoc City, Leyte tragedy happened (Typhoon Thelma, 1991) – which left 8,000 people dead – timber cover was only 18%."² Deforestation has led to soil erosion, silting up of rivers and reservoirs, species extinctions and a huge depletion in water resources at the same time as flooding disasters.

Rain forests are destroyed not just by logging but increasingly by burning, simply to create bare land to farm animals, or crops to feed animals, largely destined for the dinner plates of the global North. This is an incredibly inefficient use of land (and water). The impact of this farming on the climate comes in many forms; the clearance of the forests, the emissions created through agriculture, the impact of transportation around the world, the refrigeration necessary, the processing of meat in factories, the packaging, and the waste, where so much of our food (a third) ends in landfill.

Globally, agriculture is responsible for 75% of deforestation, between 19-29% of all greenhouse gas emissions and 56% of non-carbon dioxide greenhouse gas

emissions.³ There is no doubt whatsoever that our current food production practices are contributing in a major way to climate change which will have adverse effects on all our lives. We cannot go on as we are.

2 What is its social impact?

12% of our food supply comes from the global South (products such as tea, coffee and chocolate, amongst others). In these areas, production of cash crops for export may at first seem like a preferable option to the typical small farmer⁴ in these countries, increasing income. However, the production of crops for export rather than food crops for consumption lays these small producers open to gluts and price drops. Climate change also affects their ability to keep producing these crops, rather than the indigenous drought-resistant grains and roots formerly produced for home consumption. Market failures mean that there are scarcities at home and farmers are prey to debt and food poverty. In India, the suicides of small farmers have reached epidemic proportions. These suicides are blamed on climate change and debt.⁵

There is much talk (particularly post-Brexit) of the advantages of free trade. But should trade simply be free or should it be fair? Wealthier nations use free trade to prevent poorer, weaker countries (usually in the global South) from enacting policies to protect their smaller farmers. Fair trade, however, seeks to protect the incomes of indigenous farmers and protect workers' rights. It also helps to eliminate pay differentials between countries. Ethically, fair trade beats free trade, and prevents richer nations from impoverishing poorer nations still further.

3 What about the impact of meat eating on the animals?

If our lives are being sustained by the loss of other lives, how do we weigh up whose life is worth the sacrifice of many others? In a lifetime, the average person will eat more than 7,000 animals.⁶ That's a lot of animal deaths to sustain one human life.

It's not just the killing which many find unethical. It's the miserable lives of many animals, brought into being for the express purpose of being killed just a few weeks later, and during their lives, confined in conditions which are completely unnatural. Pigs have a natural lifespan of 15-20 years, but pigs reared for consumption are typically slaughtered at 5 months. Around 1.5 billion pigs are slaughtered worldwide per annum. The vast majority of these are intensively reared. Even in the UK, only 3% of pigs will spend their entire lives outdoors.⁷ Pigs are intelligent animals, mammals like us, and typically are deprived of everything that would give them some semblance of natural life. Chickens are also bred intensively, in even more vast numbers; over 50 billion chickens are reared every year,⁸ mostly in extremely unnatural conditions. The average chicken reared for meat grows up in less space than an A4 sheet of paper and

has more space around it in the oven while being cooked than it ever did in life.⁹

Once one starts to look at farming practices, it is easy to conclude that only free-range meat is ethically sound. However, even here, animals are slaughtered when still infants and dairy cattle are separated from their calves. Are our lives worth these sacrifices?

4 What's my fair share of the global food supply?

According to the United Nations (reporting in 2002), the average number of calories available per capita is 2800.¹⁰ This is actually as much as any one of us needs (and rather more than we need if our lifestyles are sedentary). Food, however, is not produced and distributed according to need. The problem, as with the global money supply, is one of unfair distribution, not lack of sufficient food globally. Nevertheless, it's reassuring to know that, so long as do not eat to excess, we are not taking more than our fair share.

However, we can't afford to be complacent. There is a huge threat to the global food supply – climate change. Already it is having a significant impact.¹¹ And while harvests in the global North may actually benefit from the impact of warming, overall the global food supply is likely to decline, and to be most adversely affected in the global South, undoing decades of progress. Current agricultural practices will have to change, not only to accommodate climate change but because food production is responsible for around 50% of global greenhouse gas emissions.¹² As noted above, a lot of these emissions are driven by animal husbandry and the desire for cheap and plentiful meat.

Conclusion

The IPCC's recent report, "Climate Change and Land"¹³ recommends measures to tackle climate change. These include changing our diet to one that is sustainable. "Examples of healthy and sustainable diets are high in coarse grains, pulses, fruits and vegetables, and nuts and seeds; low in energy-intensive animal-sourced and discretionary foods (such as sugary beverages); and with a carbohydrate threshold."

This would be a diet which is good not only for us but for the planet and our continued future upon it. Those looking for a diet which is not only sustainable but also ethically sound might wish to go further and cut out all animal products. Veganism has surged in popularity recently as people have become more aware of the impact of their diet on the climate and their fellow creatures. But if veganism is a step too far, we should seriously consider becoming vegetarians. And if even that seems too difficult, we can do worse than remember the wise advice of American professor Michael Pollan: "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants."

Actions we can all take:

1. Buy only what you need, use up leftovers, make soup, stews or crumbles with any vegetables and fruits that are past their best.
2. Cultivate your garden or your window box if that's all you have. Gardening is good for you and home-grown food has the lowest food miles possible.
3. Shop local, buy seasonal produce, preferably whole not processed.
4. Cut out meat and fish and go vegetarian or ideally vegan.
5. Choose fair trade products whenever possible.

Jenny Jacobs

¹ <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/challenges/soya/>

² <https://www.gaiadiscovery.com/nature-biodiversity/philippines-deforestation-threats-and-reforestation-issues.html>

³ <https://ccafs.cgiar.org/bigfacts/#theme=food-emissions>

⁴ The great majority (80%) of the world's farms measure 2 hectares or less: Fair Trade International Report from 2013

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/31/suicides-of-nearly-60000-indian-farmers-linked-to-climate-change-study-claims>

⁶ <https://veganuary.com/myths/>

⁷ <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/farm/pigs/farming>

⁸ <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/farm-animals/chickens/>

⁹ The 2007 EU Directive on broiler chickens allows the equivalent of around 19 birds per square metre, depending on their weight at slaughter. <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/farm-animals/chickens/meat-chickens/#overcrowding>

¹⁰ <http://www.fao.org/english/newsroom/news/2002/7833-en.html>

¹¹ <http://theconversation.com/climate-change-is-affecting-crop-yields-and-reducing-global-food-supplies-118897>

¹² <https://www.campaigncc.org/international/articles/food>

¹³ <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/>