



Vegetarianism and the environment

Vegetarians abstain from meat, poultry, fish and marine products of animal origin. Some vegetarians also eschew dairy products and eggs. Vegans add honey to the restricted list.

There are various justifications for vegetarianism:

- ethical (not causing animals to suffer or die);
- medical (a vegetarian diet reduces the risk of atherosclerosis, cancer, cardiovascular diseases and certain gastrointestinal ailments);
- economic (a vegetarian diet is cheaper than a meat-based diet);
- religious (some doctrines prohibit the eating of meat, or at least certain kinds of meat); and
- environmental (35 percent of people who switch to a vegetarian diet are motivated by environmental considerations).

According to UN-led research, the raising of livestock is one of the largest contributors to environmental degradation worldwide, and modern methods of raising animals for food contribute to massive deforestation, air and water pollution, land degradation, the loss of topsoil, climate change, the overexploitation of resources including oil and water, and the loss of biodiversity.

Research has shown that the meat industry has many negative environmental impacts:



Water pollution

Waste from farms and slaughterhouses is allowed to flow into streams and rivers without appropriate treatment, contaminating water sources.



Soil erosion

Cattle are heavy, and their hooves compress the soil and disturb its structure, leading to soil erosion.



Deforestation

Forests are destroyed to grow crops to feed beef cattle. As much as 2.5 square metres of forest may need to be cut to produce a single 100-gram burger.



Water consumption

2,000 litres of water are needed to produce 1 kilogram of meat, whereas just 55 litres are needed to produce 1 kilogram of wheat. The average farm today consumes as much water as a city with a population of 10,000 people!



Climate change and pollution

The meat industry produces 51 percent of all greenhouse gases. By comparison, transportation (cars, aeroplanes and ships combined) produces 13.5 percent of all greenhouse gases.



Hunger

Millions of people in the world die of hunger, while 60 to 70 percent of vegetable crops that could save their lives go to feed livestock: 90 percent of agricultural land is used for livestock grazing or growing animal feed.



Chemical additives and genetic mutation

The use of antibiotics on livestock farms to prevent disease is not only a source of contamination. Prolonged use also leads to the appearance of microorganisms that are resistant to antibiotics, posing a future threat to both humans and other creatures.

There is clear evidence that vegetarianism makes far fewer demands on the environment, and that continued intensive meat production could have severe consequences for future generations.