



Save the Planet: Eat Less Meat

by [Piper Hoffman](#) | April 18, 2012



What if you could make one immediate change in your life that would significantly decrease global warming and other damage to the environment? Great news: you can. Stop eating meat.

Perhaps the best thing you can do to save the environment is eat a plant-based diet, according to the United Nations, Sierra Club, Worldwatch Institute, Al Gore's Live Earth, and many others. Even replacing just some of the meat you eat with grains, vegetables, legumes, fruit, and other plant-based foods can make a big difference.

Just changing the source of your meat won't do much. As a recent [New York Times](#) op-ed by James E. McWilliams explained, there is no such thing as ecologically sustainable meat. Local, organic, free-range — all of it takes or will lead to a surprisingly large toll on the environment.

Meat production may be the most important reason for global warming, which results almost entirely from a combination of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. Raising animals for food is a major source of carbon dioxide and the single largest source of the other two gases: 37% of methane and 65% of nitrous oxide emissions, as Kathy Freston reports in [The Huffington Post](#). The [United Nations](#) has concluded that eating a vegan diet "is vital to save the world from the worst impacts of climate change," according to [The Guardian](#).

The livestock industry is largely responsible for deforestation, which obliterates ecosystems that would otherwise absorb carbon dioxide. According to Freston, "Animal agriculture takes up an incredible 70% of all agricultural land, and 30% of the total land surface of the planet. As a result, farmed animals are probably the biggest cause of slashing and burning the world's forests. Today, 70% of former Amazon rainforest is used for pastureland, and feed crops cover much of the remainder." Clearing all this land for pasture and feed crops also shrinks or eliminates the habitats for countless species of wildlife.

Just cutting back on your meat consumption has an impact. Al Gore's [Live Earth organization reports](#) that "If everyone went vegetarian just for one day, the U.S. would save: 100 billion gallons of water, enough to supply all the homes in New England for almost 4 months and 70 million gallons of gas, enough to fuel all the cars of Canada and Mexico combined with plenty to spare." Joining the "[Meatless Monday](#)" movement, which encourages people to eat no meat for one day every week, could go a long way.

Driving a Prius doesn't even approach the impact of eating less meat. According to the [Environmental Defense Fund](#), "if every American skipped one meal of chicken per week and substituted vegetarian foods instead, the carbon dioxide savings would be the same as taking more than half a million cars off of U.S. roads." A [University of Chicago study](#) confirms that in terms of fossil fuel consumption, there is "an order of magnitude" difference "between dietary and personal transportation choices." What is on your plate matters much more than what is in your garage.

Climate change isn't the only ill that the meat industry generates. Freston notes that "raising animals for food is a primary cause of land degradation, air pollution, water shortage, water pollution [including the ammonia that causes acid rain, and] loss of biodiversity." The livestock industry alone is "one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global," according to [the U.N.'s report](#).

We don't need to eat all this meat. We'd actually be [healthier without it](#), as meat consumption plays a role in causing our three biggest killers: [heart disease](#), [cancer](#) and [stroke](#). To help protect the environment and your health, visit [the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine](#) for a free Vegetarian Starter Kit. The earth will thank you.