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Sir Paul McCartney: why I have a beef with meat-eating

The former Beatle and long-time vegetarian and environmentalist on why he's asking the world to forgo meat for one day every week



Sir Paul McCartney, with daughters Mary and Stella (Wireimage)



By Geoffrey Lean

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Paul McCartney, as all the world knows, grew up on a council estate in Liverpool. What is less well-known is that there were fields nearby, and these fired a little-publicised lifelong commitment to the environment – which has now led to him heading an international campaign to conserve wildlife and combat climate change.

“It was a very urban housing estate,” he told me the other day. “But right at the

edge of it, there was countryside, and I used to go there and watch skylarks rising into the air and then swooping down.”

Those inspirational birds started something. For the past 20 years – partly through his love of wildlife – Sir Paul has farmed organically in Sussex. Long convinced of the dangers of global warming, he started trying to reduce his carbon emissions years ago. And both concerns, together with 30 years of vegetarianism, have caused him – with two of his daughters, designer Stella and photographer Mary – to campaign to persuade people to forgo eating meat for one day each week.

He told me how much he delights in the “huge benefits” of experiencing the “wildlife and wildflowers, that people are not seeing these days” flourishing on his pesticide-free farm. And he added that – when passing a forest – he often stops and thinks: “Wow. Those trees are taking in carbon dioxide and converting it into oxygen. That’s some kind of a miracle.” He went on, characteristically: “I say ‘Well done’, because I can’t do that.”

But he worries that worldwide “we are cutting down trees through deforestation. Messing with nature on such a huge scale,” he believes “is going to create big problems.”

His concern about global warming also seems to have had an early origin. “I remember, as a kid, watching on TV when three scientists came on a children’s programme and talked about what we now call climate change. They said that the way we were going, things would get serious and talked about floods, hurricanes and all kinds of extreme weather. I remember being very impressed.”

He does not mince his words on the topic. He thinks “we are in a desperate situation. Look at the facts. They are pretty much indisputable. The deniers can say that it is not true, that we are just having a bit of bad weather. But their case is being eroded as time goes on.

“Like everyone else, I wanted to do something about it. I switched to a hybrid car and did all the little things people do, like turning off the lights at home. But it’s very difficult to do much as an individual.”

Then came a seminal moment. In 2006, the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), published a report concluding that livestock were responsible for 18 per cent of the world’s emissions of greenhouse gases – more than all forms of transport put together – through the carbon dioxide released from clearing forest for pasture, burning fuel to produce meat and transport it and make fertiliser for feed, and through the much more powerful methane produced from their burping and nitrous oxide from their manure.

“I had assumed that the big villain was transport,” Sir Paul told me. “What was

striking was to find people who did not have a vested interest in vegetarianism identifying this long shadow.

“The billions of animals used by the fast-food chains are completely different from anything we have dealt with. Just a few cows in a farmer’s pasture don’t seem to cause too much trouble, but the methane now being released on a large scale is shocking.”

The FAO has since revised down its estimate, blaming meat production – which last year rose to 308.5 million tons, a 25-fold increase over the past two centuries – for a still substantial 14.5 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions, though some scientists continue to insist that the figure is higher. And a recent study by Cambridge and Aberdeen universities concluded that on present trends, such emissions would almost double over the next 35 years.

That, however, is just the start of the environmental toll. The 2006 report concluded that meat farming also produced more than 100 other polluting gases, including more than two thirds of the world’s emissions of ammonia, one of the main causes of acid rain.

More than 70 per cent of the world’s farmland is used to graze livestock, while 40 per cent of the wheat, rye, oats and corn grown globally each year, plus 250 million tons of soya beans and other oil seeds, go to feed cattle, effectively causing cows to compete with people for food. Nearly a quarter of the planet’s available freshwater goes the same way, according to the blue-chip Worldwatch Institute, a Washington DC think tank.

Ranching, the FAO has concluded, is “the major driver of deforestation” worldwide, while over-grazing is turning a fifth of all pastures and rangeland into desert.

One study found that livestock was the major cause of the decline of 15 out of 24 important global ecosystems. And wastes from feed lots cause eutrophication, choking the life out of rivers and streams, and creating vast “dead zones” in coastal areas.

“We must do something,” said Sir Paul. He and his daughters launched their campaign after hearing of organisations in the United States and Australia advocating meatless days each week and latched on Mondays “because people often overindulge over the weekend and have a guilty feeling”.

Observing meat-free Mondays, says Greg Barker – the former climate change minister who is now the Prime Minister’s personal adviser on global warming – has the same impact as “taking your car off the road for a month each year”, as well as helping to combat wider environmental destruction. And the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has been calling for reductions in meat-eating since 2001.

Sir Paul added: “This is a very simple, doable idea. It’s an easy – and quite pleasant – thing to do. It really will make a difference and is something where everyone can contribute to their children’s future.

“Most of the other things we are being asked to do to lessen global warming are quite difficult, but this can be a first step for all those who want to do something. Those I know who have given it a try are very happy: it can be quite exciting to try something new.”

And it’s good for health. Sir Liam Donaldson, the former government chief medical officer, has said that reducing Britain’s consumption of animal products by 30 per cent by 2030 would prevent 18,000 premature deaths a year.

The McCartneys’ Meat Free Monday campaign has attracted support from pressure groups such Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and WWF (formerly the World Wildlife Fund) and from a clutch of celebrities, including Kevin Spacey, Gwyneth Paltrow, Ricky Gervais, Lily Cole, Pamela Anderson, Victoria Pendleton and Sophie Dahl.

Cities – from Cape Town to Aspen, Colorado, from Sao Paulo to San Francisco – support meat-free day initiatives, and this week the Israeli Knesset adopted “Meatless Mondays”.

Some two million children – in Britain, the US, Germany, Finland, Belgium, Brazil, Taiwan and South Africa – attend schools that have a meatless day each week. Sir Paul says he finds “the kids rather like it, because it means they are actually doing something about safeguarding their future”.

Which, come to think of it, is more or less where he came in.