

# Our daily choices about food connect us to a worldwide economic system

[Food & Diet](#)



" Our daily choices about food connect us to a worldwide economic system," Lappe said in 1987. " Even an apparently small change--consciously choosing a diet that is good both for our bodies and for the earth--can lead to a series of choices that transform our whole lives. " From this perspective, vegetarianism is far more than just a flaky remnant of the '70s--it's the key to conservation, and to a sense of personal responsibility for the environment. Do we genuinely want to make a difference? The hard facts indicate the kind of impact we can make with a dietary change.

And that impact is profound. Consider, for example, water. More than half of U. S. water consumption goes to raising beef. It takes 25 gallons to produce a pound of wheat, but 2, 500 for a pound of meat. In one day, the diet for a meat eater requires 4, 000 gallons of water; for a true vegetarian, only 300. That contrast amounts to real conservation. It also means fewer dams and more water left in streams for beady-eyed fish. Some 90% of the water pollution that results from organic wastes is attributed to livestock.

The inorganic residues of pesticides are also overwhelmingly caused by meat production (55%) and dairy operations (23%). For example, American corn production, which is predominantly oriented toward the feeding of livestock, uses 30 million pounds of toxic chemicals annually to control the corn borer. Only 11% of combined pesticide residuals come from the growing of vegetables, fruits and grains. And even that small percentage should decline as organic gardening and agriculture continue to spread. Consider greenhouse gases--those carbon dioxides and methane that trap escaping heat and raise the earth's temperature.

Many experts say the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the upper atmosphere could lead, in two short generations, to a global warming that will have catastrophic effects--expanding deserts, flooded coastal areas, loss of species and genetic diversity and massive dislocations in agriculture. Combustion of fossil fuels releases carbon dioxide and contributes heavily to the greenhouse effect, yet the fossil fuel energy to produce one pound of feedlot beef would grow 40 pounds of soybeans, the chief ingredient in tofu delights and hamburger extenders. A mixed blessing, I must admit.

Whenever my wife goes on a "cleansing diet," I become submerged in such soybean concoctions. Sometimes my willpower is weak. In early March, during a cleansing episode, I sneaked out one night to get a juicy porterhouse at a nearby restaurant. ) If all earthlings were meat eaters, global petroleum reserves would disappear by the year 2003; if vegetarians, by 2250. That gap constitutes a big cushion of security--long enough to develop alternative sources of energy and modes of transport.

National security would also be cushioned if only 10% of my fellow Americans stopped eating meat, oil imports would no longer be necessary. Major sources of methane are the digestive tracts of higher mammals, including those raised for food. By reducing their numbers, we therefore decrease the habitat for methane-producing organisms. In the United States alone, livestock animals manufacture a full 250, 000 pounds of manure every second.