



28 May 2010

CHOOSING A DIET THAT IS HEALTHY FOR THE WORLD

This month's column by Transition Haslemere, a community group developing local responses to the long-term threats of climate change and the decline of cheap oil, looks at the impact of our diet.

If we talk about a healthy diet, then we can ask who is the diet healthy for? If we look beyond just ourselves, then we see that our diet has an impact on the countryside, on animals (unless we are vegans) and on the wider world in terms of climate change.

Like other developed countries, our diet in the UK is heavily based on meat and dairy products. Meat consumption has risen nearly 60% in Europe over the last 40 years or so to around 90 kilos of meat consumed per person per year. Developing countries are rapidly catching up, with China increasing consumption 1,250% to 54 kilos of meat per person during the same period. Who can blame these countries from wanting to follow our lead? But if we look at the projected demand for meat and dairy products into the future, the picture is worrying.

Currently, we slaughter around 60 billions animals a year worldwide to feed ourselves. This will have to double if we are to meet demand by 2050. This will put tremendous and unsustainable pressure on our farmlands and water sources. Already, most meat is produced by factory farms, and these frequently create environmental pollution and ignore animal welfare, and are the major source of diseases transferred between animals and humans – one of the world's biggest health threats.

Furthermore, feeding all these animals requires massive acreage of cropland. Meat is an inefficient way of producing protein, with beef producing 20 pounds of usable protein per acre compared with rice or corn which produce over 200 pounds of protein per acre. Vast areas of forest continue to be cleared for animal feed crops. Meanwhile, animal production already generates more greenhouse gases globally

than transport, including aviation.

But it is possible to feed the world sustainably and humanely, said Joyce D'Silva, director of public affairs for Godalming-based animal welfare charity Compassion in World Farming in a talk at the Haslemere Museum on Wednesday 26 May organised by Transition Haslemere. It will require developed countries to reduce their meat intake while allowing developing countries to increase theirs until we converge at a viable point. And it will need a shift from environmentally unfriendly factory farming to more organic and free range methods of food production. Cities such as San Francisco, Cape Town and Ghent have recently introduced meat-free days once a week, where citizens and local restaurants and shops are encouraged to follow a vegetarian menu for a day.

We are lucky in Haslemere in that we have local farms that produce very high quality organic, free range meat, dairy and other agricultural products. Farms like Imbhams and Lower Roundhurst sell their products at our local farmers' market and elsewhere. If we follow a diet with a more moderate intake of meat from sources such as these we will promote not only our own health, but the health of our local economy and local environment, as well as the wider health of the planet.

For more information see www.transitionhaslemere.org

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