

Want to eat healthy? Try an eco-friendly diet

January 19 2018, by Michalis Hadjidakou



Healthy eating should include thinking about the environmental cost of your food. Credit: Al Case/Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA

Following our annual Christmas overindulgence, many of us have set ambitious goals for the year ahead. But eating healthy shouldn't just mean cutting down on snacks; given the [environmental impact of food production](#), a more sustainable diet should feature high on everyone's list of New Year's resolutions.

Australians have one of the largest [per capita dietary environmental footprints in the world](#), so there's definitely room for improvement. But,

as with all diets, radical and sudden changes like going vegan or vegetarian are [notoriously difficult](#).

Smaller, more achievable [behavioural shifts](#) are more realistic. This also makes sense from an environmental perspective – large-scale drastic changes [might end up shifting one type of environmental impact to another](#).

This guide is about making informed, feasible changes towards a more environmentally sustainable diet. It starts with the [food](#) items you put in your shopping basket.

Meat, junk and waste

Sustainability researchers, like myself, track the [life cycle of food](#) from farm to fork, measuring the energy used and emissions generated by the entire process.

Australia's food consumption contributes significantly to [greenhouse gas emissions](#), [water scarcity](#), land clearing and biodiversity loss, and [ocean pollution](#).

Read more: Kitchen Science: from sizzling brisket to fresh baked bread, the chemical reaction that makes our favourite foods taste so good

There are many reasons our diets have such a large environmental [impact](#), but one of the biggest is that we're a nation of [meat](#) eaters. On average, an Aussie eats 95kg of meat a year, significantly more than the [OECD average](#) of 69kg.

Generally, animal-derived foods require [more energy and resources and release significantly more emissions than most plant foods](#). This is particularly true for red meat: [the current average consumption is 24%](#)

[higher than the maximum recommended intake.](#)

Another reason is our overconsumption of total calories, often driven by junk foods. Eating more food than we need means the environmental resources used in producing that extra food are wasted. It also leads to a [range of health problems such as obesity.](#)

Finally, the [extraordinary amount of household food waste](#) in Australia – [around 3.1 million tonnes of edible food a year](#) – also has a major impact.

What is realistic dietary change?

Sustainable dietary choices aren't just about environmental impact – it also means being realistic and consistent. Only 11% of Australians are [vegetarian](#), so expecting a majority to drastically reduce meat consumption is impractical, and probably alienating.

Alternatives like flexitarianism (eating meat more rarely) are more achievable for most.

An added complication is that most Australian cows are raised on pasture, which has a high carbon footprint but [requires less water](#) than growing many plant foods. So, the complete substitution of [red meat](#) or dairy with plant-based products could simply change one environmental impact for another.

Putting it all together – simple shopping advice

Moderation: Cutting out staples of the Australian diet, like meat, is not a realistic goal for many people. But try moderating your cmeat that has the highest environmental impact (beef and lamb) and instead go for

chicken or pork.

Reducing [junk food](#) is good for your wallet, waist and the environment. Processed meats or dairy-based desserts have the [highest footprints amongst junk foods](#), so when the urge to indulge hits, go for fruit-only desserts such as sorbets. Or just buy more fruit to freeze and turn into delicious and healthy smoothies that you can enjoy even more regularly. (Grapes are very high in sugar, and when frozen are great summer treats.)

Meal planning can also help cut down food waste, so it might be worth trying a pantry planning app.

Substitution: Think about your favourite recipes, and how you can swap out the most resource-greedy ingredients. Some meats can be replaced with alternative sources of protein such as legumes and nuts.

Sustainably-farmed or sourced seafood is another protein alternative with a lower environmental footprint compared to meat, as long as you [choose your seafood wisely](#) – for canned tuna make sure to check the label! Seasonal produce usually requires fewer resources and needs to travel less to the store, so it's worth checking a guide to [what's in season in your region](#).

Complex packaging of many food products, which is often unnecessary, also contributes to their [environmental impact](#). Opt for loose fruit and vegetables and take your own shopping bags.

Experimentation: When you do buy meat, opt for novel protein sources such as game meat – we are lucky to have an abundance of kangaroo as a more sustainable protein alternative in Australia. If you're feeling even more adventurous, you could also [try some insects](#).

This guide is a starting point for thinking about a more sustainable diet, but food systems are [incredibly complex](#). Animal welfare and the viability of farming communities are just part of the social and economic issues we much deal with.

Ultimately, while consumers can drive change, this will be incremental: transformative change can only be achieved by food producers and retailers also coming on board to drive a more sustainable food system.

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