

Veganism may not save the planet: Study suggests limited meat consumption better for environment, animals

February 15 2023



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Vegans and vegetarians have long argued their approach to eating is the kindest—to animals and to our planet.

But new research from the University of Georgia suggests that might not actually be the case.

The paper found that a diet of mostly plants with local and humanely raised meat is likely the most ethical way to eat if we want to save the environment and protect human rights.

"There's nothing sustainable about this plant-based model," said Amy Trauger, author of the study and a professor in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences. "It is really just a lot of greenwashing. You really don't have to look very far to see how problematic this narrative is."

Soybeans used in U.S. tofu and tempeh products aren't grown here

Most of the soybean products (like tofu and tempeh) in the U.S. aren't grown here, the study found. Up until recently, they were largely imported from India, where [soybean production](#) contributes to widespread deforestation and [habitat loss](#). Soybean plantations also take up valuable land space that could be used to ease food insecurity in the country instead.

And the pollution and [environmental impact](#) from transporting soybeans hundreds of thousands of miles to the U.S. is its own environmental catastrophe.

Similarly, palm oil, which is often used as a vegan substitute for butter or lard, is mostly imported from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Nigeria. Local ecosystems there have been devastated by deforestation and loss of biodiversity as millions of hectares of forests are razed for palm oil production.

On top of its environmental impact, the [palm oil industry](#) has been the subject of numerous allegations of human rights violations. Child labor, rampant sexual abuse and rape, and exposure to hazardous pesticides without proper protective equipment aren't uncommon.

"People prioritize the lives of livestock and domesticated [farm animals](#) over the lives of the people who grow palm oil or soybeans," Trauger said. "Corporations love to market to people that eating this way will make a difference in the world, but it won't."

Farm animals could help mitigate climate change

It's a common refrain that reducing [meat consumption](#) should help mitigate climate change. But that has little to do with the animals themselves. The issue is how the meat industry currently operates.

"Livestock is super important to both the sustainability of a farm system and to climate change mitigation," Trauger said.

For instance, one pig can produce over 150 pounds of meat and 20 pounds of bacon. Raised on a pasture, outside in a forest with a diet of tree nuts, surplus milk and vegetable waste from nearby farms, that pig can also contribute to soil, forest and ecosystem health.

When the time comes to harvest the animal, a small-scale processing plant that avoids plastics and employs well paid staff could be used to keep the supply chain short and transparent.

That one pig could feed a family for months, Trauger argues.

"What is left in the wake of that pig's life is soil restoration, small-business health, human health and a short supply chain that is traceable," she said. "There's definitely an argument for reducing the amount of

meat that we eat, but we can get a good deal of our protein needs met with a small amount of animal products like meat or eggs. Meanwhile things like avocados, coconuts, cacao and coffee are plant-based, but they're destroying the environment and livelihoods."

The study was published in the *Journal of Political Ecology* and is part of a larger book project contracted with the University of Washington Press .

More information: Amy Trauger, The vegan industrial complex: the political ecology of not eating animals, *Journal of Political Ecology* (2022). [DOI: 10.2458/jpe.3052](https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.3052)

Provided by University of Georgia

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