

The Low-Carbon Diet

Change your lightbulbs? Or your car? If you want to fight global warming, it's time to consider a different diet. By Mike Tidwell/Photography by Catherine Ledner

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CUTTING CARBS

I read with interest "[The Low-Carbon Diet](#)" [January-February], and I draw a much different conclusion regarding author Mike Tidwell's assertion that "it's got to be about morality, about right versus wrong." Why are we not seeing more emphasis on solving the root cause of the many dilemmas we face: global overpopulation? I don't think the solution to carbon emissions is to spread finite resources among an obscenely large and growing global population. A sustainable population, considerably lower than at present, is the only rational goal worthy of pursuit. So when I read Tidwell's well-written prose, I must question the morality of his having fathered two children, adding to the root cause of many of the problems under which all living creatures suffer. We must solve the problem, not the symptom.

Greg Filzen, Everett, WA

Tidwell and others make the claim that even grass-fed animals generate greenhouse gases not related to the fossil fuel-intensive grain production that provides nutrients for feedlot animal production. Specifically he states that cows and other animals generate methane. But the methane generated is not fossil carbon, it is part of the short-term carbon cycle—i.e., the carbon in question was removed from the atmosphere within the past year or so by photosynthesis, consumed by the animal, and released back into the atmosphere. So though methane is more potent (but shorter-lived) than CO₂, animal-generated methane is not adding carbon mass to the atmosphere.

Michael Fagan, Oconomowoc, WI

Mike Tidwell responds: Michael Fagan has a point that livestock fed on grass versus energy-intensive factory grain pellets will produce less in the way of greenhouse gases. But there's disagreement among scientists as to how much of the carbon captured in grass is then fed back to the atmosphere as methane, a gas 21 times more powerful than CO₂. Much of the grass actually winds up as manure ready to fertilize the ground for more grass or vegetable crops. But there's no doubt that mass meat consumption at current levels cannot be sustained by free-range, grass-fed animals. The sheer increase in required land would topple more carbon-sequestering forests and pollute more streams to meet the daily U.S. intake of a nearly 4,000-calories-per-day diet that is heavy on meat and dairy. Best to eat no meat at all or dramatically less of the grass-fed variety.

It was the animals' suffering that made me turn to ethical veganism 20 years ago. After becoming vegan I learned what a boon it is for my own health—I never fall sick anymore. I also understood what it means for the environment. Eating plants instead of animals has a huge impact on every sphere of our life. It also has emotional and spiritual benefits that only someone who has tried it knows about.

Dr. Nandita Shah, Mumbai, India

I'm totally impressed with Tidwell's unselfish decision to change his diet. But I must take issue with his comment, "The bad news, I suppose, is that the cost of meat could rise." Pricing people out of buying a dangerous product is good news, just as raising the price of gasoline in order to reduce our profligate use of fossil fuels would be a good thing. I also take exception to the observation that "knowingly eating food that makes you fat or harms your local fish and birds is one thing. Knowingly eating food that makes children across much of the world hungry is another." To my mind, they are all the same thing. There aren't degrees of immorality based on the victim's identity. If we learn nothing else from this global mess of our own making, it should be apparent that what hurts one living being in earth's family hurts all beings, and what damages one place on this planet damages all places. Thankfully, the corollary is also true: What helps one individual helps all, and what helps one location helps all corners of the globe. Tidwell's walk of his talk is proof of the latter.

Susan Clay, Houston, TX

To suggest that eating meat is immoral and contributes to suffering and hunger for children is insulting. Tidwell criticizes the use of synthetic fertilizer, then the proliferation of animal manure. So what are the organic farmers and gardeners to use for soil enrichment and compost? He also narrows down his criticism to "we in the West" for our errant ways. What about the rest of the world that is producing and eating meat and factory farming?

Stephen Sprehe, Palm Coast, FL

One can still enjoy meat and live low-carbon. White-tailed deer are at historic population peaks in much of the East, as are feral pigs in the South. Both provide local, organic, low-fat meat without the heavy carbon footprint. Sustainable populations of other species of wildlife and fish provide the same benefit, and also provide outdoor recreation. Responsible hunting and fishing should not be overlooked as options for people who choose to live by high environmental standards.

Samuel Wiest, Asheville, NC