

Lucy Butler – *The Impact of the Cattle Industry on the Environment*

Most of you probably already know the health risks associated with red meat. Past research has shown it can increase the risk of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high cholesterol and certain cancers, most particularly bowel cancer. However, I am not here to talk about the effects it has on us, but the effects it has on the environment.

To start off, here are some statistics that may shock you: 30% of global water consumption, 45% of the Earth's land use, and 91% of deforestation in the Amazon Rainforest are all due to animal agriculture. It is also the leading cause of habitat destruction and ocean dead zones. You may be wondering, if animal agriculture has this much toll on the environment, then why do we know so little about it, and why are the major environmental groups not doing anything to fix it?

'Save The Water' charities preach about how we can lower our water usage by taking shorter showers and turning the water off when we brush our teeth, but as important as that is, domestic water use only accounts for 5% of the total water usage in the US, compared to 55% on animal agriculture. Did you know it takes over 11,000 litres of water to produce 1 pound of beef? This means just that one burger requires 3000 litres of water, the equivalent of 2 months' worth of showers. When a representative from the charity was confronted with these statistics and asked why there is no work or information on this issue, he just stuttered and gave no answer.

It is not just 'Save the Water', who reacted like this, other charities also could not give a legitimate answer to the question, and some such as 'Greenpeace' even refused to have an interview on this topic. If you look on the websites of these organisations you will not find much (or any!) information on animal agriculture or its impacts on the environment. However, activists have been speaking out. Sister Dorothy Stang was a nun living in the Amazon who dedicated her life to protecting the rainforest and spoke openly about the impacts of animal agriculture. Walking home one day, she was gunned down at point blank range by a hired gunman from the cattle industry. She is one of 1100 activists who have been killed in Brazil in the last 20 years. In fact, the documentary that inspired this speech had its funding cut in case it caused disparity, but it was still produced and released independently.

The documentary also spoke about the waste that the actual cattle produce. Animal agriculture accounts for 51% of human greenhouse gas emissions.. Cows produce an obscene amount of waste, none of which is treated, most is dumped in oceans, killing marine life and creating ocean dead zones. Annually, enough animal waste is produced to cover the entirety of San Francisco, NYC, Delaware, Hong Kong, Tokyo, New Delhi, Bali, Rio, Berlin, Paris, London, Denmark and Costa Rica. This accounts for all 70 billion farm animals that are raised just to feed the human population.

Cattle ranching also require a lot of land, which is the leading cause of deforestation. This is not just land for grazing cows, but growing the feed. Once a cow grazes on an area of grassland, that area can no longer be used for much else because the soil is either very weak or infertile. Surviving on a vegan diet requires 1/6 of an acre a year per person, a vegetarian diet requires 3 times this amount, and a meat based diet requires 18 times this amount. An average meat eater saves 1.4 tonnes of CO2 emissions a year by removing beef from their diet, 1.6 by being vegetarian, and 1.8 from being vegan. This just shows how

much CO₂ is produced by cows and how much we can save by just giving up a beef, not giving up all meat all together. I made the conscious decision to give up red meat for my own health and for the environment, and I am not saying that you have to give up anything I do not want to force my views on you. But I did want to explain the reasoning behind my lifestyle choice and hopefully teach you all some things you may not have already known. Personally, I have not found changing my diet to just give up one type of meat that challenging as I can still enjoy all other meats and foods. I hope some of you walk away from this inspired to change your eating habits, even if you only just cut down on your red meat intake, it still makes a difference.