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Eating the world

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Eating the world

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Humans' appetite for meat is destroying Earth. Mindsets and diets need to change

Humans love to eat meat. From 50 million metric tons in 1950, annual meat production has jumped over five times to 275 million metric tons in 2015. That translates to the slaughter annually of some 300 million cattle, 1.5 billion pigs, and a staggering 50 billion chickens. The discarded chicken bones, scientists says, will form a fossil layer under the Earth's surface that will mark the Anthropocene – the geological age dominated by human activity.

Much of that can be attributed to the rapid urbanisation of the 20th century, explains **Sir Nigel Thrift**.

"We are literally eating up the world, a world that is basically being turned into a reservoir of land, fresh water and sea, whose chief purpose is to feed cities," explains Sir Nigel, Visiting Professor at the University of Oxford and Tsinghua University at a recent SMU Office of Core Curriculum lecture titled, "Killer Cities". He elaborates:

"The resources needed to consume large mammals are consuming the planet, from the water that's needed to reproduce them to the plants that they need to eat to live. Approximately 85 percent of the grain produced in Europe and the United States is fed to animals, not to human beings. In China, the proportion is already 65 percent.

"Going on from that, not only are you lending all this land over to feeding animals, you're also scrunching the soil in serious ways. The soil itself is disappearing – an estimated loss of 10 to 14 kilograms of organic carbon from the earth's top soil, about eight percent of the top two metres of used land so far. Topsoil loss between 10 and 40 times faster than it's being replenished. About one quarter of terrestrial surface is considered to be degraded.

"Why? Because of the way we feed cities."

CHANGING DIETS...

Cities in and of themselves are not bad, Sir Nigel points out. Urban agglomeration is "probably the only way to accommodate the ballooning weight of the world population", he quips while listing resulting benefits such as longer lifespans and inventions that improved general well-being.

But as economies and cities grow, along with their populations, so does the taste for meat as a sign of economic development. How does one increase human well-being without doing more harm to animals and the planet? Should zero-growth policies be considered?

"Everyone says it would be very difficult to transition to a zero-meat economy but it's not that difficult," Sir Nigel asserts, mentioning how a third of all food globally is wasted and can be better managed to feed humans. "Going from that, you would transition more slowly to non-meat foods. It would result in meat-light diets that large parts of the world used to have – you just go back to them."

He adds: "I would use the market as a mechanism. If you look at the use of land for meat, the price is ludicrous. You should price it to what the real cost of production is, then people would stop eating it. But I don't think there is one answer to all that. I'm not saying, 'We should stop eating meat. Full stop.'"

Should humans replace land mammals with fish on the menu then? The situation at sea, warns Sir Nigel, is not much better.

“There’s a battleground on land but there’s also a battleground at sea,” he says. “Basically, it’s the Wild West. It’s true that there are kinds of laws and quotas but fishing fleets mostly take little notice of it. They do all kinds of dreadful things such as scooping animals that have nothing to do with fishing at all.

“Between one and 2.7 trillion fishes are killed by humans each year by industrial hunting. In the last 150 years we’ve actually come to the point where fishing is genuinely unsustainable. The number of fish in the sea is declining.”

...AND MINDSETS

On top of purposeful killing in the form of slaughtering animals for food, cities also kill animals inadvertently. Recent research in the U.S. estimate that up to a billion birds die annually after colliding with tall buildings in America alone. The bright lights of big cities also confuse migratory birds, a situation most recently brought to the fore – again – by the “Tribute in Light” in New York City that commemorates the 9/11 attacks.

San Francisco and Toronto have building codes that require the use of [bird-friendly glass and other best practices](#) to reduce incidences of birdstrike, while several American cities have guidelines to make buildings safer for birds. Sir Nigel believes the way cities are built, such as planting more trees, is one way to reduce the inadvertent killing of animals.

But more importantly, he says, mindsets need to change. Citing Christopher Stone’s 1972 paper “[Should Trees Have Standing? - Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects](#)”, Sir Nigel emphasised that “there is absolutely no reason why you can’t give rights to ecosystems and animals of one kind or another” when “corporations are treated in many countries as legal persons”.

“Why can that extension not happen for other kinds of beings? We need a mindset that honours these other beings, not just see them as something we can grab and go with. I think there are ways that that can be done.”

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