

SHOULD WE ALL BE VEGAN?

Veganism is more than an individual diet – it’s an ethical and ecological choice in a global context. But what does it actually mean — and what would a plant-based planet look like? 'Should We All Be Vegan?' explores the ins and outs of a vegan future.

Food trends come and go, but veganism – eating and living without animal products – is a lot more than a passing fad. It’s a choice that has steadily been gaining adherents for decades, before exploding in popularity in the last few years. As concerns for personal health, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability coalesce, more and more people are turning to plant-based living.

In the U.K., 7% of people now define themselves as vegan. Sign-ups for the one-month vegan campaign “Veganuary” almost doubled in 2019, while orders of meat-free food have nearly quadrupled. In the United States, there was a 600% increase in people identifying as vegan between 2014 and 2017, while in India, which has a long history of religious and cultural norms that avoid meat, more than a quarter of the population now have a vegan diet.

Even in China, known for its meat-based cuisine, new government guidelines have encouraged the country’s 1.3 billion people to reduce their meat consumption by at least 50%. In Hong Kong, 22% of the population already practices some form of plant-based lifestyle.

So is veganism the future? [...] The environmental arguments for veganism are substantial: with industrial or “factory” farming now the norm, the raising and rearing of animals contributes at least 14% of human-made greenhouse gases. On top of these emissions, industrial farming also goes hand in hand with deforestation to create new agriculture and grazing land, particularly in South America, where the worldwide demand for beef has made the clearing of rainforests to raise cattle profitable. By removing trees that transform carbon into oxygen, deforestation further contributes to global warming.

In terms of calorie input and output, animals are also highly inefficient as a food source. Beef from feedlots, for example, takes up to 5.5 kilograms of grain (more than 18,000 calories) and almost 70,000 litres of water – plus energy and human labour – to produce just half a kilogram of beef, which offers just 1,137 calories for humans to eat.

A move towards widespread veganism would radically reshape our planetary landscape, and with it our sustainability: In 2016, an Oxford study estimated that the adoption of a vegan diet planet wide would cut emissions connected to food production by 70%. Since food production is second only to the energy sector, this would likely have a significant positive effect on global warming and climate change. [...]