

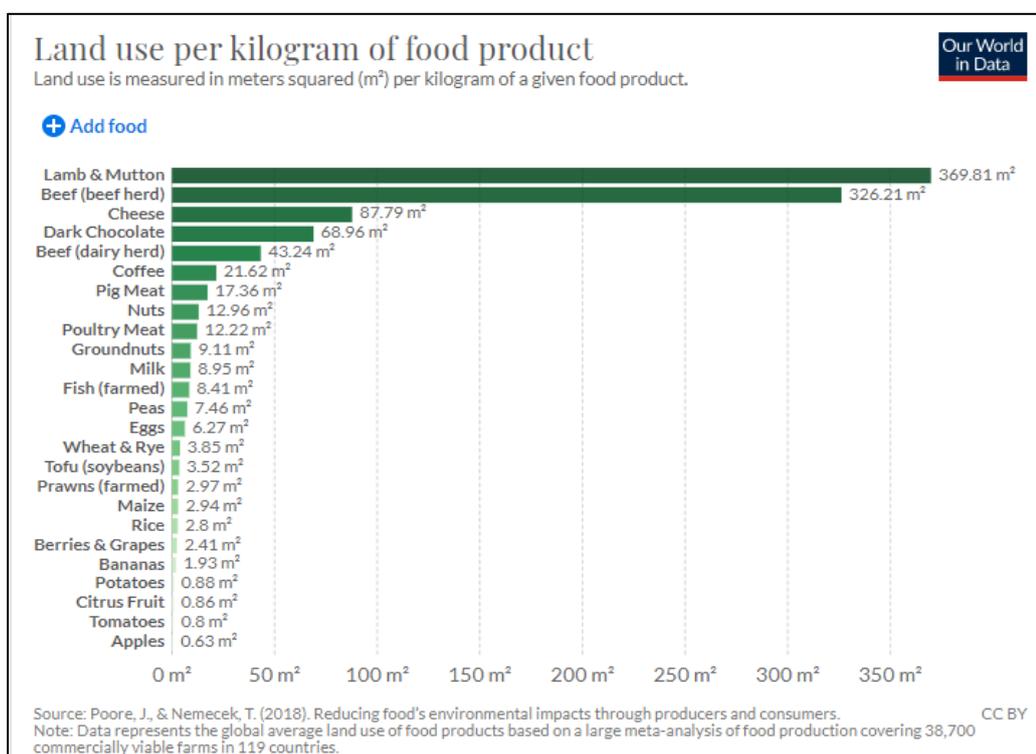
Sustainability Series Episode 2: Why does it all start with what we eat

Between 2014 and 2018, [an area of tropical forest as big as the UK](#) was lost every year in the Amazon. [More research](#) suggests that in 2019 alone this figure grew to an area as big as a football pitch being lost every six seconds. And by September last year, [2020 had already seen more fires than 2019](#), thus becoming the most taxing year on the Amazon rainforest since 2012. With these premises, 2021 is not off for a great start.

But what does it all have to do with the beef cuts we buy in the UK? Simply put, forests are being destroyed to feed the animals that end up on our plate. And the impact of our food choices doesn't stop here. Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions caused by food production, distribution and transportation play a significant role too.

Deforestation

[Meat consumption over the past 50 years has more than tripled](#). This increase has also been linked to the overall improvement of the quality of life, i.e. the richer we get, the more meat we consume. As shown in the graph below, meat has the highest impact on land use for two reasons. On one hand, land is used to grow an ever growing amount of livestock, and on the other hand cattle are fed soy, so forests are being destroyed to make space for soy agriculture. Of all the soy produced worldwide, an impressive [80%](#) is destined to feed animals.



One might think that buying locally grown meat would solve this issue, but that's unfortunately not the case. Most farmers in the UK (as everywhere in the world) import the soy they feed their livestock with from Brazil and other Latin American countries, thus actually indirectly contributing to deforestation. Supporting local farms is definitely a good choice, but it's often not possible to find out about details on their production chain.

Why should we care?

Forests are the natural habitat of more than half the world's land-based plants and animals, and three-quarters of all birds. Taken out of their ecosystem, many species face extinction.

Furthermore, forests absorb carbon dioxide, playing an important role in balancing the negative effects of pollution. However, when destroyed by wildfires, they actually release carbon dioxide and other GHG. Currently, [deforestation accounts for 10% of global warming](#).

Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Emissions

[Research suggests](#) that the food system (incl. production, processing and distribution) accounts for 26% of global GHG emissions. Of this amount, animal products are responsible for more than half emissions, with the highest contributors being meat and dairy products. The factors that have a bigger impact on GHG emissions are land use and farm stage processes such as the use of fertilizers and enteric fermentation (the production of methane done by cattle when digesting food).

When it comes to transportation, the biggest culprits for GHG emissions are foods shipped by air. Unfortunately, labels don't show whether food coming from abroad has been shipped by boat or air, but as a general rule of thumb, products coming from far away and with a very short shelf-life are likely to have travelled by air.

What can you do to help? Here are our top tips for a sustainable diet:

1. Opt for plant-based, low-processed food

As shown above, meat and dairy products have the highest negative impacts on the environment. By contrast, plant-based foods tend to require much less energy and create lower emissions. Beware of the whole production chain though and prefer wholefood alternatives when possible (whole foods are processed as little as possible and contain no chemical additives).

2. Shop organic, seasonal and local products where possible

Globalisation and modern agriculture techniques mean that we can now have any food we want at any time of the year. Choosing organic means choosing products that meet certain legal standards of production, including avoiding artificial fertilisers and pesticides and using crop rotation to maintain soil fertility and limit pollution. [Here's](#) a list of the approved UK organic control bodies.

Preferring local and seasonal products also helps lower the impact of emissions caused by transportations as well as support the local economy. Plus, seasonal products taste much better!

3. Beware of the packaging

A growing number of stores selling plastic-free loose products is popping up in the UK. Here you can bring your own jars and containers to refill with fresh (and usually organic) foods and cut down on plastic and packaging. Check out [this list](#) to see if there's a store near you.

In general, have a look at the packaging your food comes in when you do your shopping. Is it plastic? Could you use it again? Is it recyclable? Perhaps compostable? Choosing loose versus bagged can go a long way.

If you're curious about your diet's carbon footprint, check out [this calculator](#) to find out more about your impact on the environment.

Living a more environmentally-friendly life can feel overwhelming: ultimately, in this day and age everything we do has a carbon footprint. Start small, you don't have to make all the changes at once. And remember, "Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world". (Howard Zinn).

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This article is written by Emanuela Nova, an Environmental Sustainability Champion. Manu is not an environmental expert but cares about the planet and is volunteering her time to support the University to improve its environmental performance and to encourage staff and students to make positive changes. You can find out more about the Environmental Sustainability Champion's group [here](#).