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Silence of the Lambs

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Livestock farming is responsible for more greenhouse gas pollution than all the world's transport. Yet governments won't touch it.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian November 9th 2022

There are just two actions needed to prevent catastrophic climate breakdown: leave fossil fuels in the ground and stop farming animals. But, thanks to the power of the two industries, both aims are officially unmentionable. Neither of them has featured in any of the declarations from the 26 climate summits concluded so far.

Astonishingly, the sectors themselves are seldom mentioned. I've worked through every [final agreement](#) produced by the summits since they began. Fossil fuels are named in only six of them. Just one [hints at using less](#) overall: the others propose only to improve efficiency (which, as we have known since the 19th century, can often [paradoxically increase](#) fossil fuel use), attempt technical fixes or, in the case of last year's agreement in Glasgow, phase down "[unabated](#)" coal burning, while saying nothing about reducing oil or gas. Not one of them suggests extracting less. If fossil fuels are removed from the ground, they [will be used](#), regardless of governments' vague declarations about consumption.

The other omission is even starker. Livestock is mentioned in only three agreements, and the only action each of them proposes is "management". Nowhere is there a word about reduction. It's as though nuclear non-proliferation negotiators had decided not to talk about bombs. You cannot address an issue if you will not discuss it.

The call to stop farming animals should be as familiar as the call to leave fossil fuels in the ground. But it is seldom heard. Livestock farming, a recent paper in the journal Sustainability estimates, accounts for between [16.5% and 28%](#) of all greenhouse gas pollution. The wide range of these figures is an indication of how badly this issue has been neglected. As the same paper shows, the [official figure](#) (14.5%), published by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, is clearly wrong. Everyone in the field knows it, yet few

attempts have been made to update it.

Even if the minimum number (16.5%) applies, this is greater than all the world's [transport emissions](#). And it is growing fast. In the 20 years to 2018, global meat consumption rose by [58%](#). A paper in Climate Policy estimates that, by 2030, greenhouse gases from livestock farming could use half the world's [entire carbon budget](#), if we want to avoid more than 1.5C of global heating.

An analysis by Our World in Data shows that even if greenhouse gas pollution from every other sector were eliminated today, by 2100 food production will, on its current trajectory, bust the global carbon budget [two or three times over](#). This is largely because of animal farming, which accounts for [57%](#) of greenhouse gases from the food system, though it provides just [18%](#) of the calories.

This issue has become even more urgent now we know the heating [impact of methane](#) is rising. Livestock farming is the world's greatest [source of methane](#) released by human activities. Yet there is no mention of it in the [Global Methane Pledge](#) launched at last year's climate summit.

Governments have not ignored these issues by accident; they have resolutely looked away. A new analysis for Chatham House finds that only [12 nations](#) name emissions from farm animals in their official climate commitments, and none seeks to reduce livestock production. Only two nations (Costa Rica and Ethiopia) mention dietary change: arguably the most important of all environmental actions, as animal farming is also the world's greatest cause of [habitat destruction](#) and [wildlife loss](#).

What accounts for this determined silence? I think there are several reasons. The livestock sector's cultural power greatly outweighs its economic power. Our connection to food is more personal than our connection to energy sources. Most fossil fuel is consumed at a distance. When we use electricity, for example, we don't think about where it comes from, as long as the lights stay on. But we think and feel a great deal about the food we eat. And, by comparison with the denial sponsored by the fossil fuel industry, the misleading claims of the livestock industry have scarcely been challenged in the media.

A scandal broke last week about an academic centre at the University of California, Davis, which turns out to have been [founded and funded](#) by livestock lobby groups. It has [downplayed the impact](#) of livestock farming, in ways that other scientists have described as highly misleading.

But this is just one aspect of the problem. Like the fossil fuel industry, livestock corporations have been [ploughing money](#) into public persuasion, using tactics first developed by tobacco companies. Some of this greenwashing has been highly effective, especially the industry's claims about "[regenerative ranching](#)" and the false assertion that pasture-fed meat farming sequesters more greenhouse gases than it releases.

In reality, grass-fed meat is by far the [most damaging component](#) of our diets, as a result of its massive land requirement, greenhouse gas emissions, and carbon and ecological opportunity costs. Despite a [plethora of claims](#), there is no [empirical evidence](#) that carbon storage in grazing land can compensate for the greenhouse gases livestock produce, let alone for the carbon stocks destroyed when wild ecosystems are converted to pasture.

A paper in Nature Sustainability found that if permanent livestock pasture in just the rich nations were [returned to wild ecosystems](#), their recovery would draw down 380bn tonnes of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, equivalent to 12 years of global carbon emissions. The UK government's Climate Change Committee [reports that](#), in England, "transitioning from grassland to forestland would increase the soil carbon stock by 25 tonnes of carbon per hectare ... This is additional to the large amounts of carbon that would be stored in the biomass of the trees themselves."

Slowly and painfully we have become energy-numerate. Large numbers of people have begun to "[do the math](#)" on fossil fuel emissions. Now we need to become food-numerate. An extraordinary feature of this debate is that when you present data, your opponents respond with pictures, generally bucolic images of cows or sheep.

Popular food writing is dominated by a disastrous combination of aesthetics and elite tastes. Famous authors propose that everyone eats the food that they like, promoting diets that couldn't be scaled unless we had several planets and no space on any of them for wild ecosystems. They urge us to use a Neolithic production system (grazing) to feed a 21st-century population, with [catastrophic results](#).

We urgently need to put these foolish things aside, to follow and understand the science, and press our governments to focus on the major causes of the climate crisis. They had two jobs, and have so far mentioned neither of them.

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