

George Monbiot

So What Would You Do?

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Those who dismiss this solution to the greatest threat to Earth systems have a duty to propose a better one. So where is it?

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 1st February 2023

Do you hate the idea of animal-free meat? Many people do. Unsurprisingly, livestock farmers are often furiously opposed. More surprisingly, so are some vegans: “Why can’t people eat tofu and lentils, like me?” Well, the new products – plant-based, microbial and cell-cultured meat and dairy – are not aimed at vegans, but at the far greater number who like the taste and texture of animals. Many others instinctively recoil from the idea of food that seems familiar, but isn’t.

So here’s a question for all the sceptics. What do you intend to do about the soaring global demand for animal products, and its devastating impacts?

Already, 60% of the mammals on Earth [by weight are livestock](#). Humans account for 36%, wild mammals for just 4%. Of birds, poultry make up 71%, wild species only 29%. While the human population is growing at 1% a year, the livestock population is [growing at 2.4%](#). Global average meat consumption per person is [43kg a year](#), but swiftly heading towards the UK level of 82kg. The reason is [Bennett’s Law](#): as people become richer, they eat more protein and fat, especially the flesh and secretions of animals.

So, if you don’t like the new technologies, what solution do you propose? I keep asking, and the response is either furious or evasive. “It’s the wrong question!” “Who’s paying you?” “Do you want us to eat slime?”

So far, only one of the people I’ve asked has answered it directly: the food campaigner [Vandana Shiva](#). “You blindly echo the myth that as people get richer they eat more meat. Indians continue to be vegetarians even when they become rich. Food cultures are shaped by cultural and ecological values.” But meat-eating in India is [rising rapidly](#), though many

people [do it secretly](#). In other words, despite religious proscriptions, enforced with vigilantism [and, in some cases, murder](#), [Bennett’s Law still applies](#).

It’s as if we were urging people to burn less fossil fuel without offering a replacement: no solar, wind, geothermal or nuclear power. This issue is just as urgent, arguably even more so, as livestock farming attacks every Earth system. It’s the primary agent of [habitat destruction](#) and [wildlife loss](#). It’s causing [rivercide](#) and [dead zones at sea](#). It generates more greenhouse gas emissions [than all the world’s transport](#). It sprawls across vast tracts of the planet, inflicting massive [carbon and ecological opportunity costs](#). Both historically and currently, livestock farming is probably the world’s most powerful agent of colonial land grabbing and the [displacement of Indigenous people](#). Meat is consuming the planet.

Substitutes for animal products can [greatly reduce this damage](#). They can allow vast areas to be [returned to dispossessed people](#) and the ecosystems they defended.

The first cell-cultured meat recently gained [regulatory approval in the United States](#). At the same time, the taste and texture of plant-based alternatives has greatly improved. I’ve recently [eaten three products](#) that are almost indistinguishable from the originals: a steak made by a Slovenian company called Juicy Marbles, a [“lamb” fillet](#) from the Israeli company Redefine Meat, and [sushi and tempura “seafood”](#) at the London restaurant 123V.

In response, Big Meat has ramped up its campaign of [demonisation](#). That’s understandable. Less so is the support the animal industry receives from people who [claim to be green](#), but happily recite its misleading propaganda. The professor of food and agricultural policy [Robert Paarlberg](#) compares this alliance to the inadvertent coalition of Baptists and bootleggers in the US a century ago. By lobbying successfully for the prohibition of alcohol, the Southern Baptists opened the door to gangsters trading in stronger and more dangerous drink. True environmentalists have a duty to break this [ultra-conservative consensus](#).

Adoption of the new technologies is likely to follow [an S-curve](#): slow, then sudden. At first, uptake will be low and will suffer repeated setbacks. But as scale rises and prices fall, market penetration is likely to reach 10% or more. That’s the point at which linear growth suddenly switches to exponential growth. It’s a trend we’ve seen in dozens of technologies, from refrigerators to smartphones.

The biggest hurdles will be political. As governments are pressurised by Big Meat, they will raise the kind of obstacles that, in the UK and US, have delayed the rollout of renewable

electricity. The UK government, for example, is reported to be [considering a ban](#) on calling plant-based products “milk” and “butter”. What it will do about coconut milk and peanut butter is anyone’s guess. No VAT is charged on meat and milk here, but most plant-based alternatives [must pay 20%](#).

The regulators that might approve the new products are often overwhelmed. Brexit has dumped a [massive workload](#) on the UK’s Food Standards Agency and its budget [falls far short](#) of what it needs. At the same time, it has been flooded with applications for CBD (cannabidiol) products: it could be years before it can assess alternative proteins.

None of these questions should be left to industry and government. Environmental campaigners should be working not to destroy the green alternatives but to ensure they are regulated properly and, through effective anti-trust laws, do not become as concentrated [in the hands of a few corporations](#) as the meat trade is. As always, this will be a political struggle as much as a technological one. And we need to decide which team we are on.

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