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Carbon hoofprints: should we have a vegetarian campus?

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Probyn-Rapsey, Fiona, "Carbon hoofprints: should we have a vegetarian campus?" (2015). *Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers*. 2563.
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Keywords

should, have, vegetarian, hoofprints, we, campus, carbon

Publication Details

F. Probyn-Rapsey 2015 Carbon hoofprints: should we have a vegetarian campus? University of Sydney

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BLOG

Carbon hoofprints: should we have a vegetarian campus?



HARN

Following the University of Sydney's latest commitment to reducing the uni's carbon footprint, Fiona Probyn-Rapsey asks us to consider the environmental impacts of our diet.



Published 12 February 2015
Posted By Fiona Probyn-Rapsey

This week **the University of Sydney** announced that it is setting itself a goal to [reduce its carbon footprint in three years to a level that is '20 percent lower than the average blended emission rate of the markets'](http://sydney.edu.au/news/84.html?newsstoryid=14575) (<http://sydney.edu.au/news/84.html?newsstoryid=14575>). Our Vice Principal of Operations wrote to us to explain that the University is taking a 'whole of portfolio' view of the University's investments; it will introduce carbon footprint reporting into its investment selection, has become a signatory to the **CDP (Carbon Disclosure Project)**, joined the UN-Led Portfolio

Decarbonisation Coalition, and it will expand its 'Environment, Social and Governance' framework to consider the economic and social rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who are very often at the coal face of fossil fuel industry activities.

The email went on to say that we, as staff members, can also help to reduce our **Campus carbon footprint** by consulting a list of 'handy tips' put together by Campus Infrastructure and Services. Their list is fairly uncontroversial, probably matched by countless other institutions and includes welcome recommendations on recycling, low carbon travelling options (public transport, cycling or walking), energy efficient equipment and the use of reusable coffee cups and water bottles.

Those 'handy tips' tell us that the way we get to work, what we do at work and what sorts of containers we drink from at work are all part of how we can 'help achieve better standards' and 'cut your own footprint'. It's the coffee and the water drinking that caught my attention on this list, because it's a recognition of sorts that food consumption on campus is also on the radar. The thing is, we don't just drink coffee and water on campus, we also eat together at Department/school/Faculty meetings (squeezed into our lunchtimes), and at University events (squeezed into our dinner times). Because eating meals together at University events has become as common an event as many of the other items listed in our 'daily routines', we should also be looking at the carbon footprint and, in this case, carbon hoofprints, of what (and who) we consume at those events.

'**Going Veg**' could indeed be added to that list of handy tips. And a note for those whose eyes are starting to roll – I'm not talking here about Sydney Uni staff having to 'go veg' all the time, but why not 'go veg' in the workplace if indeed the workplace is committed to reducing its carbon footprint-that-includes-many-hoofprints?

The effects of **animal agriculture on the environment** and on climate change is perhaps less well known or accepted than the effects of using non-recyclable paper (oh the shame) or using our cars to get to work (scandalous!). [The UN report Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options](http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.HTM) (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.HTM>) provides an overview of the environmental impact of the livestock sector, while recognising that policy trends in this area are dominated by economic, social, health and food security concerns. That is why concerns about animal welfare (let alone animal rights, or feminist care tradition) are sometimes pitched along these lines in order to be part of the 'conversation'. Suffice it to say my own reasons for 'going veg' are not restricted to environmental concerns but also include concerns about the industrialization and commodization of animals themselves.

But back to the 'yous' on Campus. If we were, as the Vice Principal of Operations encourages us, 'to consider how you can help reduce the University's emissions as a workplace' then it seems to me that divesting from ingesting meat based products at University events is a sensible suggestion, even a 'handy tip' worth taking up. Livestock's Long Shadow makes the following salient points that are relevant to the University's plan to **reduce our carbon foot-hoof-print**:

1. The livestock sector contributes to 9% of total carbon dioxide emissions, 36% of methane and 65% of nitrous oxide. That means that overall, the livestock sector contributes around 18% of the 'global warming effect', 'even larger contribution than the transportation sector worldwide'. The 'handy tips' mention transportation twice, but meat eating doesn't rate a mention. It seems to me that if we are asked to consider cycling to work, or use public transport, we might also be asked if we'd mind having a salad sandwich rather than an animal based one.

2. The Livestock sector represents 'the largest of all anthropogenic land uses', 30% of all 'ice free terrestrial surface of the planet' and 70% of all agricultural land. In some areas, livestock expansion represents the primary reason for deforestation.

3. The Livestock sector is a 'key player' in increasing water use and water depletion and water pollution (for instance, through pesticides for feed crops, 30 million tonnes of ammonia emitted by livestock waste etc). So, as well as drinking water from a tap rather than a plastic bottle, we might also be encouraged to think about the amount of water that goes into producing animals for meat.

Because the **demand for meat is set to grow** over the coming decades, then all the problems associated with the livestock sector are also expected to grow. Livestock's long shadow warns against the 'business as usual' trend because this will result in an increase in anthropogenic greenhouse emissions, a continuation of land degradation and deforestation, more CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) or factory farms with higher concentrations of nitrogen, phosphorus, toxins that pollute water and '**destroy terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity**'. The report also gestures towards vegetarianism as one 'reason for optimism'.

This raises the question of why the 'handy tips' for helping to make the campus more '[environmentally minded \(https://intranet.sydney.edu.au/campus/services-support/sustainability/reduce-footprint.php\)](https://intranet.sydney.edu.au/campus/services-support/sustainability/reduce-footprint.php)' does not also include the option of vegetarianism? I wonder if there was a concern that it would be going too far and that 'legislating' about the dinner table is akin to 'legislating' in the bedroom; cut to hand wringing/eye rolling/here she goes again groaning/[murmurings of vegan killjoy \(http://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/4/4/623\)](http://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/4/4/623). Meat eating is sometimes stereotyped as a 'personal' thing, as opposed to a political choice and those who have decided to 'go veg' have complicated this assumption. Suddenly, with a vegetarian at the dinner table, (we often don't even have to say anything!) the **politics of meat** become uncomfortably present.

From my experience on and off Campus, it's rare to meet a meat eater who is passionately committed to eating meat at every meal. I'm one of the ones at the meeting table who gets to eat from the labeled plate, the one marked VEGETARIAN or VEGAN. Usually this single platter of sandwiches marked VEGETARIAN or VEGAN means that I also sit next to other 'vegos'. And sometimes things get complicated. Sometimes a 'meat eater' will accidentally take one of 'our' sandwiches, eat it and then realizing their misidentification (they do not identify as 'vegos'), will apologise for eating 'our' sandwich. The next sandwich they take will be from the 'meat sandwiches' platter that is not marked in any way (**the privilege of occupying the norm is to be unlabelled**). At this point the meat eater who has taken one of 'ours' (and feels bad for taking from our restricted pile), has to then take a chicken or beef sandwich next, even though they would probably have been just as happy to eat from the same platter as the vegetarians. I imagine that many meat eaters turn reluctantly, even sheepishly, towards the unlabelled meat eaters sandwich platter. An event like this, a little fracture in the 'rules' of eating together while eating very much apart, happens on such a regular basis that I wonder if ordering separate platters is really worth it in the end. My sense is that meat eaters would not really mind if the catering was vegetarian and vegan. Indeed, they may not even notice given that they don't eat meat for every possible meal, and don't need to 'check' whether meat is in or out of the sandwich.

But the labeling of the exception – vegetarian and vegan – functions to hide and perform the operation of 'the rule', which is that meat eating is the norm. And being a meat eater is complicated, as Erica Fudge has pointed out. Meat eaters have to learn the cultural conventions around which animals they are allowed to eat (rabbit but not cat, pig but not dog, cow but not horse etc) and which parts they are supposed to eat (tongue or rib? Steak, eye or sinew?). And there are all sorts of conventions regarding being 'polite' in the presence of meat eaters by not mentioning the animal whose leg that once was.

Meat eaters are a notoriously easy bunch to make nervous. Sometimes all it takes is the presence of a vegetarian to make meat eaters uncomfortably aware of the fleshiness of their choices: are you looking at me? No, but your steak would have, once. As countless Animal studies scholars have argued, the delicate rituals of meat eating require a careful and deliberate obscuring of the associations between meat and the animal that it is/was. This occurs through language (cattle becomes 'beef', pig becomes 'pork'), through caricature (all those happy cows and pigs in the supermarkets) and through the displacement of slaughterhouses away from sight. [Australia's perennially scandalized Live Export industry \(https://www.academia.edu/2903009/Stunning_Australia\)](https://www.academia.edu/2903009/Stunning_Australia) is a part of this displacement and the rituals of concealment that meat production relies on. Sending them 'off shore' is an extension of the logic of distributed and dispersed responsibility that we see in the slaughterhouse itself, where so many hands disassemble the cattle into body parts that it seems difficult to pinpoint exactly where responsibility for the animal's death lies (see Vialles 1994). And as Timothy Pachirat points out in his recent ethnography of an American slaughterhouse – Every Twelve Seconds, the racial stratification of the slaughterhouse is itself another way of organising and dispersing responsibility for the 'dirty job' of killing; keeping it away from white hands, making sure they can stay clean and away from the 'madness' of butchers, marked by the burden of keeping meat eater's nerves from jangling. (I'd be lying if I didn't admit to enjoying all these moments of nerve jangling. But that doesn't get us very far).

What might move the 'conversation' along a bit is if we recognized that these issues are circulating every time we sit down and eat together, at work. When it comes to the University's carbon footprint, it'd be good if we recognized that hoofprints are part of it too, that's it not just about cars,

paper and coffee cups. For every carbon footprint on campus, there are herds of carbon hoofprints and ever more 'handy tips' to be considered with them.

Image: Ryan Thompson

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Jason Grossman says:

I agree with every syllable of this. (Syllables are the units of meaning, right? Hm. OK.)

In particular, it's very difficult for non-experts to know WHICH greenhouse-reducing strategies are really important and which are just minor. (As you point out, the use of meat is in the "really important" category.) The managers of large organisations like universities, unlike individual non-experts, have no excuse for not knowing all about this — they could find out with one email to an environmental policy unit — and so they should be taken to task at every opportunity for encouraging the use of meat.

It's also really weird that university managements spend a lot of effort on maintaining and improving the treatment of their laboratory animals, but have no qualms about paying other people to mistreat meat animals in the most horrendous ways imaginable.

February 12, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42787#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42787#respond)

Fiona Probyn Rapsey says:

Thanks Jason. That's an interesting point about 'animal use' on campus being confined to laboratory animals, and not the ones served up as food at events.....

February 17, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=43312#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=43312#respond)

Isa (<https://horsesfordiscourses.wordpress.com/>) says:

What a great idea! I even wonder if a simple cost/benefit analysis would lend weight to the argument, should you chose to suggest it to the Operations Division?

February 12, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42788#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42788#respond)

Fiona Probyn Rapsey says:

Hi Isa,

Thanks for this suggestion – it's a good idea. In a broader sense, Goodland (2014) writes that the livestock industry is exposed 'to a unique degree' and that 'replacing at least 25% of today's livestock products with alternatives by 2017 may be the only available business case for industry leaders to act pragmatically to halt climate change before it's too late" see: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/qcb.12454/abstract> (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/qcb.12454/abstract>)

February 17, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=43313#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=43313#respond)

Lisa (<http://www.lisaheinze.com>) says:

Great post, Fiona.

In my experience food is one of the hardest lifestyle changes to 'sell' as part of the environmental message, despite the significant impact reducing meat consumption can have on greenhouse gas emissions. However, I'm still surprised there was no mention at all in the tips for staff. I hope that the people who will be implementing any carbon-reduction plans for the university are considering the food choices available on campus, including at events where it is easier than people may think to offer vegetarian – yet filling and delicious – menus.

February 12, 2015

Reply (<http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42793#respond>)

Des Bellamy says:

There is an interesting review of "Livestock's Long Shadow" by a couple of World Bank academics in Worldwatch Institute's report: Nov/Dec 2009:

<http://www.worldwatch.org/files/pdf/Livestock%20and%20Climate%20Change.pdf> (<http://www.worldwatch.org/files/pdf/Livestock%20and%20Climate%20Change.pdf>)

It concludes that the real contribution of animal agriculture to greenhouse emissions is probably over 50%.

February 12, 2015

Reply (<http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42794#respond>)

Fiona Probyn Rapsey says:

Thanks for this Des – that is certainly a very interesting report and well worth reading. The authors suggest that taking into account both direct and indirect sources of GHG emissions means that livestock represents at least 51% of emissions. They include things like livestock respiration, additional land use factors, 'undercounted' methane and other factors like meat production itself – from slaughtering to cooking and distributing. Also strange that the FAO report does not include farmed fish... So, the short story is – even though the FAO report – Livestock's Long Shadow is shocking, there is good reason to believe that the statistics are in fact a lot worse than they are letting on. More work on this is available at ...<http://www.chompingclimatechange.org/about/> (<http://www.chompingclimatechange.org/about/>)

February 17, 2015

Reply (<http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=43311#respond>)

jennifer hood says:

what a fabulous idea for Sydney Uni to lead the way and assist people to eat less meat, which is good all round for them and the environment-not to mention animal welfare.

February 12, 2015

Reply (<http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42795#respond>)

Fiona Probyn Rapsey says:

Hi Jennifer, thanks for your comments. I too think that Sydney Uni should take this up. I was sent a very interesting article about Wadham College at the University of Oxford, which has also decided to 'go veg' as a means of responding to Climate change etc – link is here:

<http://blueandgreentomorrow.com/2014/06/14/university-of-oxford-college-votes-for-vegan-meals-to-help-fight-climate-change-2/>
(<http://blueandgreentomorrow.com/2014/06/14/university-of-oxford-college-votes-for-vegan-meals-to-help-fight-climate-change-2/>)

February 17, 2015

Reply (<http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=43309#respond>)

Tess Lea says:

In addition to making compulsory work meals more palatable, it would also mean the meagre offerings usually given to us vegos via the labelled platter would actually be enough to go around, given the collective hands that dive in. More seriously, I think it would be sensational if the university took a leadership role in surfacing the invisible role that the industrial meat sector plays and for once, place us at the forefront of important legal,

environmental and ethical debates. Perhaps the Voiceless sponsors could be involved in a launch of the idea with the VC – how fabulous would that be! Thank you Fiona, for your wonderful words and ideas and for committing to their public release. Takes time and courage and I really appreciate it

February 12, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42804#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42804#respond)

Fiona Probyn Rapsey says:

Thanks Tess – I'd also like to see more local (departmental) discussion along the lines of campus catering etc – maybe whole departments and then schools can make a decision to 'go veg' for a semester and see what happens. I genuinely think that most of the time the meateaters won't notice and won't mind.....

February 17, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=43314#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=43314#respond)

Tess Lea says:

PS and can we talk about the plastic packaging of everything on campus?

February 12, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42805#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42805#respond)

Nik Taylor says:

Thanks for this, have sent it to the divestment people at my university as i think this is a great initiative they could get behind if willing. My suspicion is they won't want to hear it, so many don't. My view is that as academics, irrespective of our own personal eating habits, we need to advocate meat free on campus, at all conferences (animal based or otherwise) on enviro grounds. Of course, there's an ulterior motive for me but that's just a bonus. The more meat free, the better frankly, whatever argument people are swayed by, even if i do get annoyed that i have to put forward anthropocentric arguments to get it done.

February 12, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42818#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=42818#respond)

Fiona Probyn Rapsey says:

Thanks Nik, I agree. A cross-campus initiative along these lines would be excellent too. cheers, fiona

February 17, 2015

[Reply \(http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=43315#respond\)](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/the-universitys-carbon-hoofprint/?replytocom=43315#respond)

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