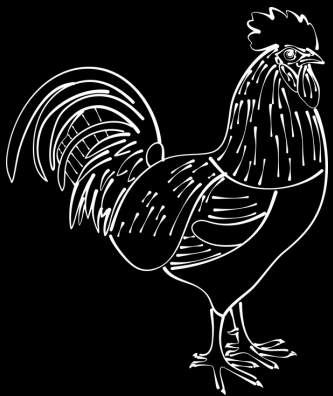


# Telling Better Stories About Food

Modern agricultural practices are unsustainable both in their environmental impacts and in the amount of animal suffering that they impose. Animal agriculture harms humans, animals, and the environment more than most plant agriculture, and extensive, premodern agriculture cannot scale to meet current and future needs. Yet, many stories about solutions propose pre-modern agricultural practices; they are also often unmotivating. How might we craft stories that better reflect the empirical and moral realities of our agricultural challenges?



The Center for Environmental and Animal Protection (CEAP) provides academic leadership for research, policy-making, and addressing critical social issues at the intersection of environmental and animal protection.

## The stories we tell

Many popular stories we tell about agriculture celebrate pre-industrial practices like grass-fed cows, local food systems, and the avoidance of synthetic chemicals. Yet the evidence shows that these practices do not reduce, and in some cases increase, most environmental impacts. Using backward-looking stories to guide our food future is unreasonable in a world of high population, high technology, and high density that is increasingly affected by climate-change.

These backward-looking stories are told in popular books, such as Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma*, Nicolette Hahn-Niman's *Defending Beef*, and by non-profits such as the Savory Institute. The stories evoke a bucolic balance with land, nonindustrial subsistence, and the alchemic conversion of inedible grasses to animal protein. Pollan referred to eating animals as "wrong in practice, not in principle." He believes eating grass-fed cattle is one of the solutions to our environmental crisis.

Yet grass-fed cattle emit more methane and use more land than industrial cattle, and they are unlikely to have a net climate benefit even if their grazing replenishes grasslands that sequester carbon. In the rare case in which this practice is low carbon or carbon negative, it still requires significant land use and specialized labor, and this makes it difficult to scale. Representing grass-fed beef as an environmental solution reinforces the habit of eating animals, when even grass-fed cattle have serious environmental impacts and cause animal harms.



Many of these stories are highly selective in their comparisons. While grass-fed beef is compared to industrial beef, often other forms of agriculture might be singled out without comparing them to anything else. For example, selectively focusing on the water demands of almond production in drought-stricken California can lead to the conclusion that almonds are wasteful while alternative food products are not. Yet animal agriculture consumes much more water in California than does the almond crop.

Stories obscure problems of animal agriculture in other ways, too. There is a general failure to appreciate that many crops are feed crops for animals. Problems with corn, for example, are largely problems of animal agriculture. Phrases like "feed the world" and "food security" are used to justify agriculture that may have very little to do with feeding humans, especially those who are food insecure; and, insofar as such agriculture does feed humans, it does so very inefficiently. Similarly, the animal harms of animal agriculture are obscured by referring to farmed animals and aquatic animals as "resources" or "protein," and measuring aquatic animals killed by weight instead of by number.

Finally, many stories about food and agriculture are idealized (e.g., evoking a bucolic balance of nature) or shocking (e.g., the conditions on an industrial fishing ship). Setting aside the accuracy of these types of stories, they can be motivating for some people. But for others, they can also be overwhelming, exhausting, and demoralizing. In concert with social psychologists and humanists, we need to develop a wider range of stories, including positive stories that motivate, guide, generate meaning, and cultivate long-term shifts in values.

## Stories for the future

Good stories are those that advance understanding, motivate constructive action, and stimulate respectful dialogue. Such stories typically have three features.

First, in order to advance understanding, good stories are grounded in empirical evidence that can support and direct us to effective solutions.

Second, in order to motivate, stories must be simple enough to offer guidance to help us make decisions in an information-rich environment. Existing food stories often mobilize large amounts of context-free quantitative information, distant future predictions, abstract ideas, global-scale statistics, and implausible or misleading claims about impacts (e.g., by changing time frames for measuring radiative forcing). They may also trigger defense mechanisms by featuring distressing images of slaughterhouses or starving people, which can induce psychological numbing and other forms of emotional detachment.

It is overly demanding to expect consumers to calculate food miles and carbon impacts, or visit farms to ensure humane treatment. Simple, straightforward messages such as those mobilized in “Meatless Mondays” campaigns have been effective. The term “plant-based diets” is a good example of a motivating frame. However, what particular kinds of stories motivate is an empirical question, open to ongoing assessment. Just as we need adaptive management with respect to environmental problems, so we need adaptive management with respect to the stories that we tell.

Finally, good stories stimulate conversations that expand our moral imagination about how to repair and replace the broken relationships we have with animals, the environment, and other people; appreciating and supporting plant and animal life (especially in contexts where humans have degraded the land and destroyed habitat); generating visions of our food systems moving forward; forming relationships with domesticated animals; envisioning how they might live outside of an agricultural setting (e.g., in sanctuaries); and protecting and restoring habitat for wild and liminal animals. Such stories would emphasize self-determination in producing and accessing one’s own food. They would speak the language of plenitude and regeneration instead of the language of deprivation. They would envision food security in a climate changed world and celebrate plant-based cuisines and cultures that are rich, varied, and world-expanding.

Romanticized stories of pre-industrial agriculture are backward-looking stories that do not help lead us into our future. But stories that emphasize animal exploitation and environmental degradation also use tools that are mostly unchanged over the past 50 years, including images of suffering, heavy reliance on statements of scientific fact, extensive use of statistics, and numbers that are not always accurate.

Agriculture necessarily interrupts nature by adding and removing energy, nutrients, and life, but this can be done in better or worse ways. The future demands that we change the way we feed ourselves. Good stories, grounded in facts, can help move us towards a better world.



This research brief was prepared by Christopher Schlotmann, Department of Environmental Studies, NYU, and is adapted from his forthcoming book, *The Ethics of Food, Animals, and the Environment*.

## References

- Charles, Dan, “American Farmers Say They Feed The World, But Do They?,” *NPR*, 2013, at <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/09/17/221376803/american-farmers-say-they-feed-the-world-but-do-they> .
- Ganesan, Rama, et. al., “A Study of the Motivations and Barriers to Participation in The Save Movement,” *Faunalytics*, 2016.
- Garnett, Tara, et al., “Grazed and Confused” at <https://www.tabledebates.org/publication/grazed-and-confused>, 2017.
- Gonzalez, Richard, “How Almonds Became A Scapegoat For California’s Drought,” *NPR*, 2015, at <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/04/16/399958203/how-almonds-became-a-scapegoat-for-california-s-drought> .
- Hahn-Niman, Nicolette, *Defending Beef*, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014.
- Hayek, M.N., Harwatt, H., Ripple, W.J. *et al.* The carbon opportunity cost of animal-sourced food production on land. *Nat Sustain* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-020-00603-4>.
- McWilliams, James, *Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly*, New York: Hachette Book Group, 2010.
- Pollan, Michael, *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Penguin, 2007.
- Schlotmann, Christopher and Jeff Sebo, *Food, Animals, and the Environment: An Ethical Approach*, Routledge, 2018.

---

© New York University Center for Environmental and Animal Protection, 2022.

The views expressed in this brief represent those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the host institutions or funders.

We encourage the wide use of this document. All permissions request should be directed to the NYU Center for Environmental and Animal Protection: [ceap@nyu.edu](mailto:ceap@nyu.edu).