

# THE TRUE COST OF MEAT

**EXPERTS SAY RISING MEAT CONSUMPTION IS THE BIGGEST FACTOR IMPACTING WILDLIFE. BUT ARE CONSERVATIONISTS DOING ENOUGH TO HIGHLIGHT THE HARM CAUSED BY OUR APPETITE FOR BEEF, PORK AND CHICKEN, ASKS JAMES FAIR?**

**N**ow, be honest, how often do you eat meat? Every day? A few times a week? Just on special occasions? What about dairy – and eggs? Do you seek out beef or pork that was reared in the UK or choose chicken because you think they're better for the environment? What about fish – do you see that as a more sustainable option?

Here's the problem with meat and most products derived from animals. Unless they ate only grass, or lived an entirely wild life, what they were fed was probably soya, wheat, maize or even palm-oil products, some of which were grown in South America or Asia, where rainforest or other habitats were lost to make way for them.

Experts estimate that for every 100 calories of fodder, you get between 17 and 30 calories in meat – cattle are the worst converters, giving only 5g of protein for every 100g of grain protein they eat, while chickens are the best, managing about 40g (but only 35g for eggs). A planet subsisting entirely on plants could feed a lot more people, and with a population forecast to reach 10bn by 2050, it's said we need to halve our meat consumption just to stand still.

There is growing recognition of the threat to wildlife from

intensive meat production, according to Peter Stevenson, of Compassion in World Farming (CIWF). "For years, there was this myth you could cram huge numbers of chickens and pigs into small spaces but the vast amount of arable land you needed to grow the crops [to feed them] was ignored," he says.

EU Countries import so much soya from Brazil every year that it requires 13m ha – an area the size of Greece – to grow it. While vast areas of the Amazon have been cleared to satisfy this demand, more pressure is now placed on Brazil's *cerrado*, a savannah-type habitat that's home to jaguars, maned wolves and giant anteaters. Only 20 per cent of the original 2m km<sup>2</sup> of *cerrado* remains intact.

**SPEAKING OUT**

Despite this, argues the campaigner Jonathon Porritt, scientists who study threatened wildlife don't speak out about the issue. "People have been trying to save endangered species and habitats for decades and, in all honesty, the rate of damage goes on unchecked," Porritt says. "What are the underlying – not immediate – causes of this? They seem very reluctant to go there."

Porritt's being unfair, says Duncan Williamson, who runs WWF's sustainable food

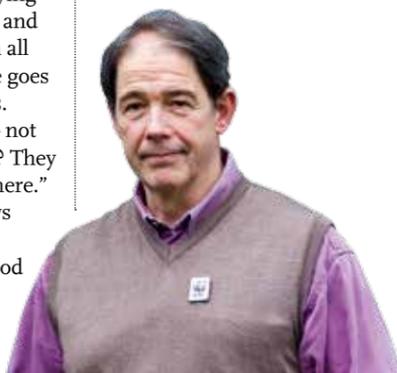


Soya farming in the Amazon (left); maned wolves at risk from expanding soya crops (top); intensive meat production (right) threatens wildlife.



**“PEOPLE HAVE BEEN TRYING TO SAVE HABITATS FOR DECADES, BUT THE RATE OF DAMAGE GOES ON.”**

Jonathon Porritt



programme. WWF helped set up the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), which tries to ensure that new palm-oil plantations do not involve the destruction of wildlife habitats, as well as the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), an eco-labelling scheme for the seafood industry. Since 2008, he adds, WWF has been more involved in raising awareness about the environmental impact of meat production.

"We were the first wildlife group to work on this, and we got no support from the press or the industry," he says. "We were attacked as being anti-meat by some people, while vegans attacked us for being pro-farmer. You couldn't win."

Telling people what they should and shouldn't eat is

contentious, Williamson admits. As a result, WWF's approach is not to be too hardline. "We encourage people to think more about food. We say, 'Eat more plants and a variety of foods, waste less food and eat less meat.' We don't say it has to be organic or locally grown."

**CAMPAIGN CONDUNDRUMS**

Lucy Bjorck, who works on food and farming for the RSPB, says they fully recognise the importance of the issue. "You can't separate UK agriculture from what's happening elsewhere," she adds. "You don't want to have lovely wildflower meadows in this country and just export the problem elsewhere."

But talking about these wider, complex issues is not necessarily

straightforward for the RSPB. "Where it's difficult, and where we're not as vocal as Jonathon Porritt would like us to be, is where our campaigning is two steps removed from birds," she says. "It can be difficult for people to make the connection."

Like WWF, the RSPB keeps its message simple. "It's, 'Eat less, but better meat – wildlife-friendly meat,'" she says. "Some of the most wildlife-friendly farmers we work with have cattle, and they feel threatened by this 'Eat less meat' movement."

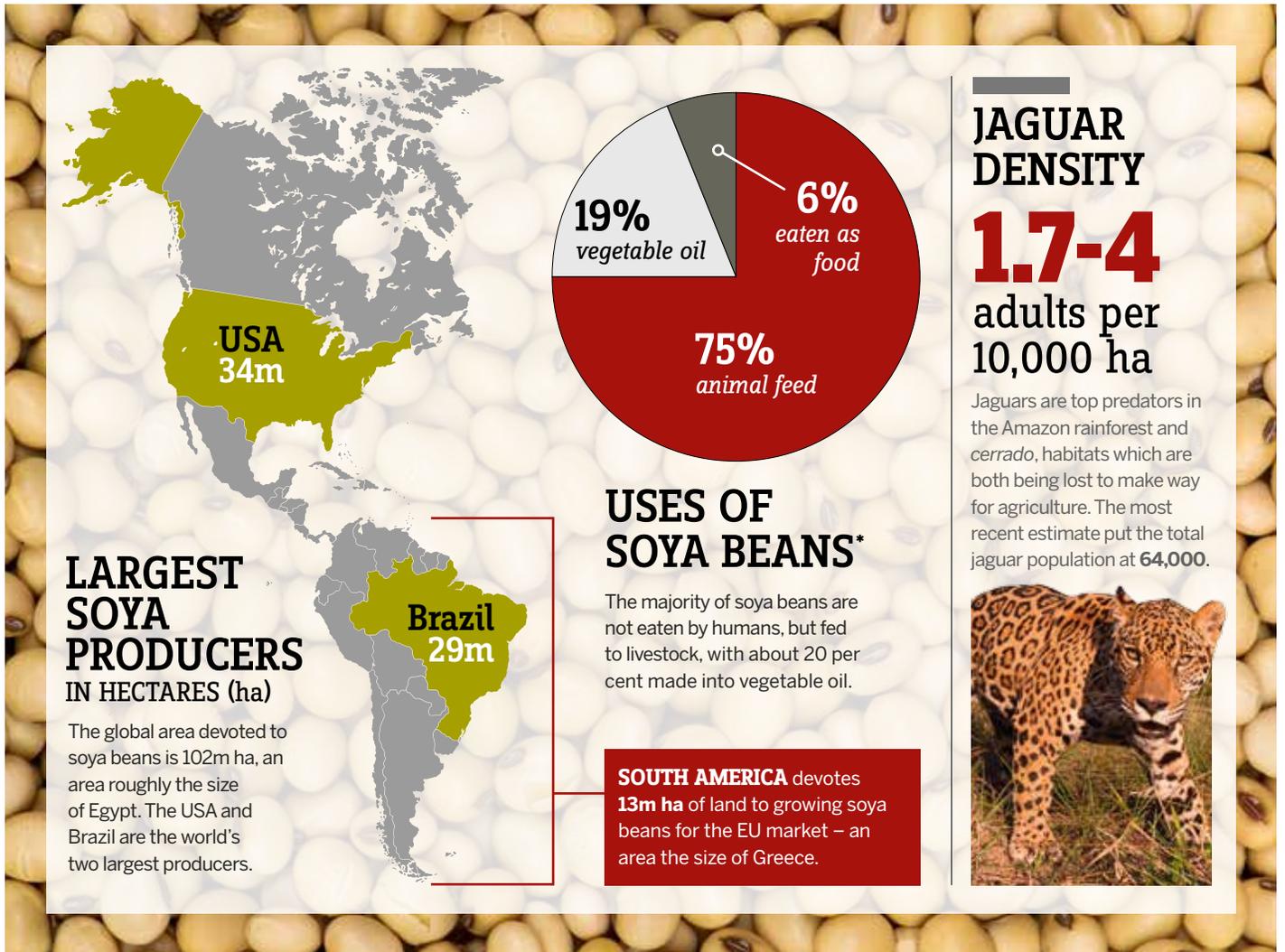
Unlike pigs and chickens, cattle can at least subsist largely on grass. If not farmed intensively, they can be important conservation tools for maintaining flower and insect rich grasslands that would otherwise turn to scrub.

**“IF NOT FARMED INTENSIVELY, CATTLE CAN BE IMPORTANT TOOLS FOR MAINTAINING GRASSLANDS.”**



But, as is well-known, bovine flatulence leads to methane escaping into the atmosphere. Because methane is 23 times a more powerful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, it has been calculated that one cow has the same impact on the environment as the emissions produced by driving 12,500km in a car – and that's without taking into account the fossil fuels used in the production and transport of their feed crops or the meat itself.

Our appetite for meat isn't only having an impact on wildlife in Brazil. Overfishing of sardines and anchovies, which are turned into food for farmed salmon, has reduced African penguin numbers by 70 per cent since 2004, while palm-oil kernels (which don't yield the ▶



valuable oil) are used in livestock feed. The EU imported half the global production of palm kernels in 2011.

And here in Britain, too. “Two thirds of the British wheat crop is fed to livestock,” explains Prof Dave Goulson of the University of Sussex. Goulson has been at the forefront of exposing the devastating impact of a group of pesticides called neonicotinoids – routinely used on wheat, maize and soya – on bees and many other invertebrates.

**HEADING FOR DISASTER**

Earlier this year, Goulson gave a lecture in which he talked about the ecological collapse that took place on Easter Island in the 1600s. The whole planet, he says, is heading in the same direction if we carry on using resources in the way we are. “We are walking into a series of inter-related disasters

– climate change, biodiversity loss, coral bleaching and so on – and ecological Armageddon, and I don’t trust politicians to do anything about it.”

What would happen if we reduced our meat consumption? “Take an extreme scenario,” Goulson says. “You could feed people on less than half the farmland we currently use, and then you could massively reduce the use of pesticides.”

It’s for these reasons that Goulson has left the sanctuary of being a scientist to calling out what he sees as the underlying reasons for the data he produces. “Some people think scientists should just do their work, publish it in a journal and let others worry about what it means. In an ideal world, that would be lovely and it would certainly be a lot less stressful for people like me.”

The idea that the world needs to reduce its meat consumption is also starting to filter through at a government level, according to Prof Tim Lang, one of the world’s leading authorities on food sustainability and an advisor to bodies such as the World Health Organisation. Denmark has proposed introducing a red meat tax, he says, and Brazil has changed its health advice in recent years to recommend a more plant-based diet.

**“TWO THIRDS OF THE BRITISH WHEAT CROP IS FED TO LIVESTOCK.”**

In the UK, a sugar tax is being introduced in 2018, Lang points out, though “faces do tend to go very white when there’s talk of one on meat.”

He adds: “One way to reduce meat consumption would be to charge more [for it], but there’s no one silver bullet – we need a whole range of policies. It’s a question of how we recalibrate culture so that meat is seen as really special, not something we eat every day. The big issue is how we win public support for this – unless the public gets it, we’re heading for catastrophe.”

So, what are you eating for supper tonight? Steak and chips – or a veggie stir fry? 🍷

**➕ FIND OUT MORE**

WWF-UK sustainable food programme: <http://bit.ly/2A99tMF>

Soya: peangdao/Getty; jaguar: Octavio Campos Salles/Alamy (controlled conditions)