

Don't let them eat meat?

The UN report into land use and climate change makes interesting reading. According to the media it is about persuading more people to eat less meat, though they concede it fell short of requiring everyone to become vegans or vegetarians. It claims that the global surface temperature has risen by 0.87 degrees C comparing 2015 with the flat temperature average of 1850-1900, the so called pre industrial period. No-one told the Victorians to remain pre industrial. It argues that further rises in temperature could be damaging. It points out that in recent years there has been more greening than browning of the planet overall, though some areas have been dried to the point of becoming deserts whilst more places have become greener and more productive. It rightly states the importance of water and soil management to wellbeing and food production.

The detailed summary for policy makers is wide ranging and suggests various ways to lower the warming gases output of agriculture. It tells us food production accounts for 23% of the greenhouse gases released by human intervention. Most importantly it reads as a plea to limit population growth. It sets out how the 150% growth in population from 1961 to 2017 is the single biggest cause of more agricultural emissions. It also points to the 80% increase in obesity as a strain on the system and argues that livestock account for half of the CO2 from agriculture. It asserts that there are 2bn overweight or obese adults worldwide.

The Report highlights the way that around 30% of food output goes to waste, and states that if this could be brought down it could make as useful a contribution to controlling gases as change of diet might make. It also urges more forests, and the retention of the forests we already enjoy, as good carbon sinks.

It sketches various scenarios for the future. The best is one where the population is stabilised at around 9bn, gets richer and better at managing soils, farming and diets. The worst is where the world population continues climbing to 13bn with continuing wide contrasts between rich and poor, some persistent poor diets and very varied farming including methods destructive of the environment.

It would be good if this Report triggered a proper debate about population growth, soil and water management as its authors probably wish. Instead the issue of should we eat meat is more eye catching and invites heated debate in the countries rich enough for meat eating to be a regular option.