

Opinion & Analysis

Meat industry pollution provides food for thought



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Delivery of cheap meat is predicated on the industry being allowed to cause unparalleled environmental damage

AS DELEGATES sit down to dine today at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Poznan, how many of them will pause to consider how what they choose from the menu are in themselves critical drivers of the climate crisis?

Worldwide, the production of meat for human consumption is "one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global", according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Yet what we eat and more specifically, how much meat we eat, rarely makes the news until yet another scare, from BSE to our pork dioxin debacle, grabs the front pages. Our seemingly insatiable carnal cravings, and the ability of producers to cater to our desires with low-cost meat, mean this sector alone now contributes almost one-fifth of all man-made greenhouse gas emissions.

The meat business is responsible for more emissions than all the world's cars, trucks, trains, ships and aircraft – combined.

Greenhouse emissions are just one element of the lengthy charge sheet on which rampant meat production and consumption stands indicted. In 2006, global grain production was around two billion tonnes. Reserves are now

at their lowest level in three decades.

One-third of this production is diverted to fatten the animals we like to eat. With almost one billion people now permanently hungry, and food prices having risen by 30 per cent in the past two years, turning 760 million tonnes of grain into feed for animals, especially cattle from which to produce meat and dairy products, is a luxury the world can increasingly ill afford.

Every year, Americans alone eat nine billion animals, mostly as fast food. The methods used to rear and feed these legions of livestock as cheaply as possible are creating vast environmental problems. With global livestock production slated to double by 2030, these impacts can only intensify.

Agriculture may well be now responsible for more pollution than the entirety of world industrial activity. As well as an ocean of effluent, the other big culprits are methane emissions and nitrates from synthetic fertilisers.

Much of this fertiliser makes its way via streams and rivers into the sea, where it creates giant "dead zones", such as in the Gulf of Mexico. Here, an area the size of Munster is destroyed by the flood of agricultural nitrates pouring from the Mississippi river. In Ireland,

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agricultural pollution has played havoc with our river systems, leading to regular fish kills.

"Eutrophication of rivers, lakes and tidal waters continues to be the main threat to surface waters, with agricultural and municipal discharges being the key contributors," according to Dr Mary Kelly of the Environmental Protection Agency.

One-quarter of Ireland's groundwater was found by the agency to have excessive nitrate levels. Expanding beef production is extremely land-intensive, and worldwide the biggest source of CO₂ emissions associated

with meat production is in land clearance to make way for new pastures. Since 1980, an area the size of India has been permanently cleared of forests.

Land used in livestock production accounts for probably 30 per cent of the ice-free surface of the planet. Every year, 10 million hectares of land are permanently lost to desertification, much of it from over-grazing.

Well over half the world's entire fresh water resources have been sequestered for human needs. Of this, 70 per cent is used in agriculture. It takes on average 100 times more water to produce a kilo of meat versus the same weight in vegetables.

Agricultural pollution from a toxic cocktail of nitrates, sewage and pesticides further pressures water supplies.

The ability of industrial-scale agriculture to deliver ridiculously cheap meat is predicated on it being permitted to inflict what the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation describes as "unparalleled environmental damage", with the tab for these "externalities" not being reflected in the price tag in the supermarket.

What about the alternatives, aren't they just elitist? Columnist Ann Marie Hourihane derided what she called "appallingly expensive organic chicken". Cost is a relative

thing. Nowadays, you can easily buy a factory-farmed chicken that would feed a family for €5. In real terms, this is a small fraction of what meat cost 10 or 20 years ago.

You get what you pay for and sometimes more besides. If you prefer your children to get antibiotics from their GP rather than their dinner, you might want to reconsider serving them food you must know is too cheap to be truly safe.

"We have worked to reduce the price of food to such an extent that it no longer reflects its value," says Bruce Darrell of Feasta, the Irish sustainability think tank. He argues that we in fact need higher food prices so that our farmers have the money to "make them better able to produce food for us".

The advice from Dr Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is that we eat less meat. Apart from saving the world and reducing hunger among the poor, it might just save your own life. Excessive meat in the Irish diet is fuelling obesity, heart disease and cancers.

And before you ask, I have no plans to give up meat (this is despite having witnessed the sharp end of the meat business as a youth when delivering cattle to abattoirs). The pleasures of the flesh are powerful indeed.