

Local group conversation starter

“Use this article to prompt thought and conversation amongst your local group about our 2022 theme: ‘Our Evolving Relationship With Food’”

Natalie Punter, National Organiser

Two news stories of June 2021 were related to our relationship with food: first, the debate about the post-Brexit deal with Australia, and second, the attempted blockade of McDonald’s distribution outlets by animal rights protesters.

In the first case, it was perhaps easy to understand the concerns that hill farmers in Wales and Scotland had about the perceived threat to their livelihoods and even their rural lifestyles.

What wasn’t perhaps so easy to grasp was how it can possibly be cost effective (never mind desirable) to ship meat half way round the world. Of course, the answer is very complex and encompasses welfare standards, regulatory frameworks and the economies of scale of mass production just for starters. The



cost of transportation did get a mention in the report, but only the monetary cost. The cost to the environment through energy production and carbon emissions to support all that shipping went virtually unmentioned. Sitting alongside that report was the undercurrent of the huge debate about the affordability of food, consumer choice, how consumer preferences drive commerce, and why businesses thrive or fail.

The second story was less well reported. We were told a group called Animal Rebellion blockaded four McDonald’s distribution outlets in the Home Counties. What caught my attention was that in their statements, the protagonists put the climate change arguments for switching to a plant-based diet ahead of animal welfare issues. They emphasised methane emissions from cattle and the deforestation of rain forests to create more pasture, with the moral question of whether killing and eating animals is right or wrong, coming second. Is this shift in the argument a natural alignment of two drivers for

change, or is it a tactical move to broaden the debate and engage a wider audience?

Getting hard data about the extent of veganism (avoiding all animal derived foods) can be challenging. An Ipsos Mori poll of 2019 put the figure at just 600,000 people in the UK, less than 1% of the population.

Looking across the rest of the world, this seems comparable with Australia, the US and Germany, for example, whilst other European countries such as Switzerland and Sweden are claiming much higher percentages, at around 4%.

My guess is that the past couple of years will have seen quite a significant rise in those figures. Just a couple of years ago, you’d have been greeted with a blank stare if you’d asked for a vegan option in most hotels and restaurants. Nowadays, they sit alongside sausage and mash and boeuf bourginon.

In addition to concerns about animal welfare and climate change, proponents of plant-based diets also point to the health benefits of avoiding meat, eggs and dairy products. A recent article published by ‘Healthline’ examined 16 randomised studies into the effects of vegetarianism and veganism, and found that there is evidence that following a predominantly plant-based diet can have positive effects on body mass index, blood sugar levels, heart disease, some cancers and longevity.* Some people have questioned whether vegan and vegetarian diets are suitable for babies and young children. It appears that arguments for children needing meat and milk are largely unfounded. Whilst some authorities recommend giving vitamin and mineral supplements, the only vitamin that’s recognised as being hard to source from a vegan diet is vitamin B12. Happily, good old Marmite can come to the rescue there, but if you’re a hater, rather than a lover, you can also find B12 in fortified cereals and soya products.

Of course, this is a huge and complex subject. It’s also interesting to see what different vegan groups feel about eating honey – and even products like avocados, where growth is supported by the importation of bee colonies to ensure pollination of crops. And there are also many ranges of vegan clothes and cosmetics that are growing in popularity as choice around our use of animal products in every area of our lives increases.

So, whatever your personal views, it seems that the arguments to make food choices that put less stress on the earth’s resources, support high standards of animal welfare and promote good health are here to stay.

Any significant changes in diet should always be supported by appropriate medical advice.

*www.healthline.com, ‘16 Studies on Vegan Diets, Do They Really Work?’, Alina Petre, March 2020

