

Food for the environment

*Report on a lecture given as part of an event organised by the Centre for Ecological Learning
Luxembourg*

Can meat and dairy products form part of an environment-friendly diet? Under certain conditions yes, they can, according to speakers at the 'Our food our future' event organised by CELL on 9 and 10 March. There is increasing recognition that the rich layer of humus that underlies permanent pasture plays an important part in carbon storage, being made up of more than 50% CO₂. Every additional tonne of humus in the soil takes 1.8 tonnes CO₂ from the atmosphere. Properly managed grassland can also contribute to biodiversity and soil fertility and increase the numbers of bees and other beneficial insects; it needs to be grazed by animals to provide natural fertiliser and prevent certain plant species from growing too large and crowding out the others.

Animals such as sheep, and breeds of cattle that thrive on grass, hay and silage, without grain supplements, can keep the grass and underlying soil in good condition while being a source of milk and meat for human consumption. Many people prefer not to eat animal products, but those whose main criterion is to reduce their environmental footprint need not give up meat and dairy altogether, as long as they pay attention to how it has been produced. Luckily organic meat and dairy products are becoming increasingly available in Luxembourg.

The 'Our food our future' event was a two-day jamboree of sharing skills and ideas on the themes of sustainable food and improving the quality of life for people, animals and the environment. It combined two concerns that belong together but are often treated separately – preserving the environment and providing enough tasty, nutritious food for everyone on the planet. The two main speakers at the closing lecture, German scientists and writers Anita Edel and Stefan Kreutzberger, emphasized some points that are not new but bear repeating.

- Mass livestock production where cattle and other animals are kept in crowded conditions and fed on grain that humans could have eaten is wasteful, environmentally damaging, nutritionally poor and certainly not good for the animals.
- Intensive stock rearing also contributes to the growing problem of antibiotic resistance, as antibiotics can be used to promote growth and prevent or treat the diseases that are likely to occur when animals are kept in crowded conditions.
- Ploughing the soil for grain cultivation begins a process of soil erosion and loss of fertility and biodiversity, which is getting worse with intensive grain farming and monocultures. The loss of fertility can be slowed down with chemical fertilisers but some areas are greatly impoverished, eg large swathes of north African desert, which in Roman times were major grain producing areas.
- Importing food often signifies taking water resources from countries where water is not plentiful, eg the water used in producing meat from south America and tomatoes from north Africa and soya imported from less prosperous countries to feed to animals in Europe.
- There is enough food in the world to feed everyone but it is unevenly distributed – the G7 countries consume 80% of the world's food supplies.
- About 4000 million people suffer some form of malnutrition, even in developed countries, counting those who don't get enough to eat and those who, although they eat plenty of calories, even enough to make them obese, lack essential vitamins and minerals.
- Worldwide, about one third of food is wasted at some point on the journey from farm to kitchen waste bin.
- Mass-produced food in developed countries is so cheap that people don't value it, which contributes to obesity and waste.
- In many countries sugar, fat and intensively-reared meat are subsidised, which encourages obesity.

The speakers were also critical of some received wisdom:

- Previous studies have shown that cattle are poor food converters, ie they need to eat a large amount of grain in order to produce a smaller amount of meat, and therefore the grain could be better used fed directly to people; but the measurements used have been called into question, and anyway this does not apply to animals that eat only grass.
- In forecasts by governments and NGOs, 'consumption' is often confused with 'need', eg current consumption of meat is multiplied according to expected population growth to produce a figure of how much meat will be 'needed' at some time in the future, without any consideration that people might change their eating habits.

To answer the question how people can adapt their eating habits in order to minimise harm to the environment, the following broad principles emerged:

- Be aware of the politics of food, how and where it is produced.
- Encourage local institutions such as creches, schools and work canteens to use local produce.
- Eat mainly vegetables and grains.
- Eat grass-fed beef and organic dairy products.
- If eating meat, adopt a 'nose to tail' approach, not just eating the prime cuts.
- Buy local products where possible.
- Reduce waste.
- Reduce packaging.

Philippa Seymour