

Time To Eat Bugs? The Lancet's Science-Free Campaign Against Meat



By Cameron English — Mar 15, 2022

In part two of our series on the Lancet's descent into ideological activism, we look at the journal's proposal to "transform" global dietary habits and protect the planet from the ravages of animal agriculture. Is there any evidence to justify this campaign against meat production and consumption?



[Image by ulleo via Pixabay](#)

Unscientific nonsense proliferates across the internet. Amplified by celebrities, activist groups, and other assorted ideologues, this misinformation surrounding issues like vaccines and crop

biotechnology leads many unsuspecting readers astray. What's often ignored, however, is that academic journals, arguably our first and best line of defense against bad research, regularly publish content devoid of scientific substance.

In [part one](#) of this series, we examined The Lancet's [long history](#) of promoting nonsense related to vaccines, GE crops, and pesticides. Here we'll analyze several instances of the prestigious medical journal advancing an openly Marxist narrative about food production and environmental protection.

Our goal isn't just to highlight and complain about ideological bias, which you can find everywhere, but also to remind science journals that they exist as a forum for academics to publish their research and analyze each other's ideas. "Transforming" the world's food system, a goal The Lancet explicitly endorses, veers far away from the journal's purpose and into a variety of activism that has little interest in evidence.

A new "sociopolitical framework."

The first question we need to address is this: why would a medical journal amplify an extensive list of long-debunked tropes about food and farming? Like [many critics](#) of modern agriculture, The Lancet's leadership seems to have an explicitly anti-capitalistic mentality, which encourages them to find villains in the private sector even when they don't exist. Longtime journal editor Richard Horton, who we met in [part one](#) of this series, said as much in a 2017 [Lancet article](#):

... [Karl] Marx offers a critique of society, a method of analysis, that enables explication of disquieting trends in modern medicine and public health—privatized health economies, the power of conservative professional elites, the growth of techno-optimism, philanthrocapitalism, the importance of political determinants of health, global health's neoimperialist tendencies, product-driven definitions of disease, and the exclusion of stigmatized communities from our societies.

One wonders how Horton would account for the [shocking deprivations](#) of even the most basic goods and services, [including health care](#), that the average Soviet citizen endured. The more important point for now is that The Lancet has made its ideological motivations plain to anyone who will read what the journal has published. [1] "Karl Marx was concerned about the health of our planet and has interested us in a way to

nurture the environment and an equitable world with improved social conditions," a team of authors [wrote in The Lancet](#) in May 2018. This project, they added, had to begin right away:

To avoid the catastrophic consequences of the exploitation of earth's resources due to capitalism, we propose a new global sociopolitical framework that is urgently needed to protect and cultivate human health. To pursue improved planetary health, we need to transform the capitalist systems on the basis of liberal free markets into nurturing equitable systems to accomplish 'the highest attainable standard of health as a fundamental right of every human being,' as stated by the WHO constitution.

In recent years, The Lancet has established dozens of "commissions" to tackle critical public health and environmental issues, including the [Eat-Lancet Commission](#) created to promote sustainable food systems. "The EAT-Lancet Commission," the [journal announced](#) in January 2019, "addresses the need to feed a growing global population a healthy diet while also defining sustainable food systems that will minimize damage to our planet."

Meat destroying the planet?

Few people would object to these laudable goals, but the Lancet's specific policy recommendations have drawn intense criticism from outside experts. In 2018, for instance, the journal published an editorial warning that "the nutritional and health issues caused by meat have become a pressing concern" and calling for government intervention to change the world's [dietary habits](#):

The likelihood is that action will need to take a wider systems approach, with a very public

conversation about meat informing a host of measures from deciding the appropriate application of government farming subsidies and finding a way to ameliorate the true costs to humans and the planet of certain processing methods, all the way through to slowly changing consumer habits over time, possibly through use of targeted taxation but certainly through an engaging, balanced conversation.

The hubris fueling this massive undertaking deserves its own analysis, though here we should stop to consider the project's scientific deficiencies. For example, the commission attributed 14.5 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to animal agriculture. According to UC Davis air quality specialist Dr. Frank Mitloehner, this estimate is misleading because roughly half the world's 200 countries are still basically agrarian societies; agricultural production accounts for most of their economic output.

"In these countries, they have very few vehicles, factories, and even sectors [of their economy] that emit greenhouse gases, but a lot of livestock," Mitloehner told ACSH during a recent interview. "So in these countries, say Ethiopia or Paraguay, you may have a situation where livestock makes up 50 or even 60 percent of their footprint."

The opposite is true in more advanced societies like the US: animal agriculture accounts for [just four percent](#) of our total emissions; energy generation and transportation are our biggest emitters at [28 percent](#) each. When you try to average these individual national estimates across 200 countries, animal agriculture's absolute contribution to global GHG emissions looks much higher than it really is.

When Mitloehner highlighted this and several other mistakes in the Eat-Lancet Commission report, its science director Fabrice DeClerck [noted that](#):

Finally, the meat consumption limits proposed by the Commission were not set due to environmental considerations, but were solely in light of health recommendations. The dietary guidelines only refer to healthy eating. Thus is not the diet to reduce climate change, but the diet to reduce the risk of premature mortality due to dietary related health causes. As you are fully aware, 25% of the adult population in the US is obese, with nearly 50% overweight. We would question whether these guidelines are 'radical' – they are very similar to what is recommended by WHO and countless countries. Following the guidelines would reduce US health expenditures in 2006-2011 by \$130 billion per year. This savings is equivalent to one-third the amount the US spent on agriculture, food, and beverages in 2010. In 2010, the US spent \$160 billion on agriculture and \$230 billion on food and beverage industry (according to GDP estimates from BEA).

That's a striking admission in light of the glowing media coverage the report received, which stressed that the commission's [recommendations were](#) "good for you and the planet." So how did EAT-Lancet so badly misreport the environmental impacts of meat production? By overlooking a mountain of contrary data.

Recent [research has shown](#), for example, that the amount of land dedicated to raising animals for food has declined markedly in recent decades. Indeed, all models of GHG emissions from land-use changes indicate that they have [declined by a third](#) since 2000. Technological innovations that [improve](#) animal health, produce better feed, and optimize the animals themselves for food production could boost this global sustainability trend. Dairies and livestock operations can even [collect methane](#) from animal manure and use it as an alternative energy source, turning a potent GHG into a sustainable source of fuel.

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The Observer
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Richard Godwin
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If we want to save the planet, the future of food is insects



Moreover, approximately two-thirds of the world's agricultural land is marginal, meaning only grass grows there. The good

news is that ruminant livestock converts these nutritionally useless grasses into meat and milk that contain a [wide variety of nutrients](#) humans need.

These facts should radically alter EAT-Lancet's policy recommendations, but the scientists on the commission aren't familiar enough with farming to properly assess the evidence. "I think they are well-intended," Mitloehner added, "but they don't work enough with people in agriculture to understand subtleties or these reports would read differently."

Conclusion

There is no denying the environmental costs of food production. Indeed, we have an obligation to soberly assess the impacts of farming and use our natural resources judiciously. But when wealthy academics and activists [warn that](#) "civilization is in crisis" and urge us to start eating bugs to avert an ecological disaster, they should do so based on sound science, not an ideology that has killed [many millions](#) of people.

[1] The Lancet isn't always opposed to big money, particularly when it benefits them. The journal is [published](#) by Elsevier, a corporate media behemoth whose parent company generates just under [\\$10 billion](#) in annual revenue. Critics have blasted the publisher for its pricing practices and efforts to block open access to publicly funded research.

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R

Randers

4 years ago

Simply put,

I will not eat the bugs, I will not live in the pod.

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C

Cameron English Mod

➔ Randers

4 years ago

I don't blame you.

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F

Frank Settineri

➔ Randers

4 years ago

"The Lancet's leadership seems to have an explicitly anti-capitalistic mentality, which encourages them to find villains in the private sector even when they don't exist". It's all part of the Great Reset. Originally proposed in 1971 the specific phrase "Great Reset" came into general circulation over a decade ago, with the publication of a 2010 book, The Great Reset, by American urban studies scholar Richard Florida. <https://imprimis.hillside.com>

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Cameron English

Director of Bioscience

Cameron English is a writer, editor and co-host of the Science Facts and Fallacies Podcast. Before joining ACSH, he was managing editor at the Genetic Literacy Project.

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Email: info@acsh.org

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tezzzer

→ Matt Smith

4 years ago

For example, in the grain belt, it used to be Bison that would provide the fertilizer. But Bison no more!


1 0 

T

Terrence Kovacs—  tezzzer

4 years ago

Indeed - so we should be grazing beef cattle on open land to replace that lost "fertilizer".

1 0 **tezzzer**—  Terrence Kovacs

4 years ago

Terrence (my name is Terry as well), we should move back to grazing Bizon. Much better for the environment, and for you meat eaters, lower fat and cholesterol. Win win!

1 0 **Berkshire_Bee**— 

4 years ago

What got me quietly fulminating recently while watching television was seeing young scholars mouthing the "meat is bad for the planet" ideas that had been shoved into their heads. This was in relation to the following news items:

Oxfordshire County Council votes to serve vegan food at meetings | Oxford Mail And not only council functions, but also the introduction of "plant-based" food into council run schools.

Local television ITV Meridian featured a farmer's protest in advance of this council meeting: this news item featuring the protest makes for amusing reading.