

The white stuff

Picture by Richard Dunwoody

For many of us, our interaction with milk involves getting a carton off the shelf from the supermarket and splashing it in a cup of tea.

Philip Lymbery wants to challenge popular conceptions about milk – he spoke to NATHAN ROWDEN.

It's not something we often give much thought to – it's just the white stuff from cows we use every day.

Philip Lymbery is the chief executive of Compassion in World Farming, and for 25 years has worked extensively on animal welfare issues, wildlife and the environment.

He believes that the way we buy and consume milk is changing, and that these changes can make a difference to the environment and animal welfare.

"Plant milk is gaining 12 per cent of the market every year in the UK and Europe," said Philip, speaking ahead of a talk called The Moral Maze Of Milk he will give at Ludlow Food Festival.

When Philip talks of plant milk he refers to alternatives to dairy milk such as soya, almond, rice and coconut.

"Anyone who looks at supermarket shelves will see that plant milks are growing," he said. "I have no doubt that plant milks are better for animal welfare – after all, there are no animals involved. But what are they doing to the environment?"

Philip set about investigating the production of plant milks while writing his book Dead Zone, travelling the world to learn more about their production.

He said: "I saw first-hand in Brazil how the industrial production of soya is expanding at the rate of hundreds of thousands of hectares every year, wiping out whole ecosystems and driving iconic species like jaguars to the brink of extinction."

During his investigation Philip contacted supermarkets in the UK, and said he was relieved to learn that plant milks were farmed from Europe and not from huge swathes of deforested areas in other parts of the world.

"Where soya is produced organically, without pesticides, with mixed rotational farming on existing farmland rather than deforestation, then things can be better," he said. "Where it is feeding people instead of factory farms, then better still."

Philip has concerns about animal welfare on what he describes as "a minority" of dairy farms.

He said: "When we think of dairy farms we imagine cows in fields turning grass into milk, and for 80 per cent of the time that is how it is. But an increasing minority are taking them out of the fields. They are kept in darkness and fed with poor quality feed. This produces poor quality milk and a poor quality of life.

"All dairy milk isn't equal in terms of welfare. But all diary milk is equal in a sense that commercial dairies rely on breaking a bond in the animal kingdom – separating mother and child. Calves are taken within 12 hours from their mothers, breaking that bond. This causes a lot of emotional pain for both. That's a big price not reflected in what we pay."

There is dispute as to whether plant milk can be called such – and currently on the shelves products are referred to as dairy alternative drinks rather than milk itself.

"Some in the dairy industry are defensive and scoff at the thought of plant milk being a competitor," said Philip. "Some will say that something called milk should only come from a cow or another mammal, but I say that is ridiculous. Soya is farmed, as are oats and almonds. Why does one part of the farming community talk down the other? It's divisive and cannibalising the industry."

Philip believes the future of buying milk in an environmentally friendly way is what he called "flexinism".

"This is about mixing things up and it's a healthier lifestyle and better for the planet. My encouragement would be for people to make sure their dairy is free range and to mix it up with things like plant milks."

● *To learn more visit philiplymbery.com or catch his talk at the Ludlow Food Festival.*