

100 Extra Cities the Size of London

Philip Lymbery is the Chief Executive of Compassion in World Farming and author of the books Farmageddon and Dead Zone. On World Population Day, 11th July 2019, he gave a stark reminder of what our planetary crisis means for our future on planet Earth. We share that here with his kind permission.

Philip Lymbery

Imagine opening your morning newspaper to read the headline, “Government agrees to building a hundred new cities the size of London.”

Well that, plus 30 more cities the size of Los Angeles, is what one billion extra people looks like. From three billion of us in 1960, there are 7.5 billion today. By the middle of this century, we are set to add another two billion people to the planet.

And like a fried egg with a small yolk within a sprawling area of white, each of those cities requires much more land elsewhere to grow food. We know in Britain that about a tenth of our land surface is urban whilst 70 per cent is devoted to agriculture. Yet, as a nation, we’re still less than two-thirds self-sufficient in feeding ourselves.

Then there’s the second population explosion: of livestock. As it stands, a billion extra people means 10 billion extra farm animals produced every year, together with all that means for land, water and soil.

Once we realise that agriculture already occupies nearly half the useable land surface of the planet – 80 per cent of which is devoted to meat and dairy – we can quickly see that our planet is under great strain.

Environmental footprint

Humanity’s footprint can be calculated as our human population multiplied by what we consume. Using this calculation, some have suggested that action on consumption alone will be enough to save the planet. However, there is growing recognition that policy attention is needed on all parts of the equation. Take consumption of meat and dairy as an example. In the ten years from 2006, the number of vegans in Britain rose from 150,000 to more than half a million. Impressive growth of over 300 per cent. Until one realises that in the same ten-year period, the number of people in the country grew by five million. By implication, the increased number of vegans was far outweighed by an increase in people choosing to eat meat.





Intensive farming

From my own studies I conclude that humanity's footprint equation, particularly around food, has a third component: method of production. Since the dawn of agriculture, 10,000 years ago, farming has pretty much worked in harmony with nature. However, the middle of the last century saw the rise of a particularly resource-intensive and damaging form of food production – factory farming. Farm animals began disappearing from the fields into windowless sheds crammed with cages and crates. Age-old crop rotations that utilised nature's ways of fertilising soil and controlling pests and disease gave way to monocultures doused in chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

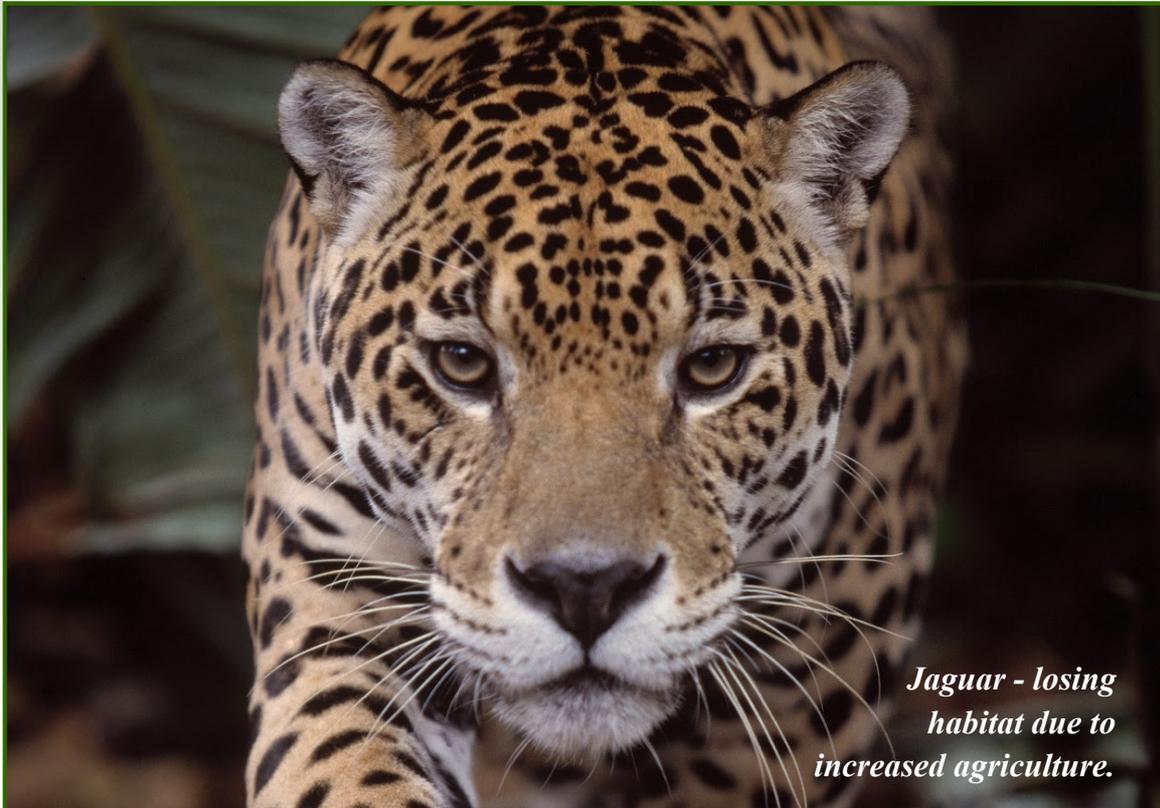
The age of industrial agriculture was born.

Two sides

Yet, it wasn't only farm animals that started to disappear from the countryside. Wildlife too suffered steep declines that continue to this day; barn owls and hedgehogs close to home, jaguars and elephants on continents far away.

In the last 40 years, since the widespread adoption of factory farming, the total number of wild mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish worldwide has more than halved.

That's a shocking statistic.



And much of this decline is down to the two sides of factory farming... The first side is where the animals are kept. Chickens taken from bushes and rangelands to be kept in cages. Mother pigs who prefer to raise their piglets in woodland edges, kept in crates so narrow they can't turn around. Cattle taken from pastures to be confined in mega-dairies or feedlots where they are fed grain instead of grass.

What looks like a space-saving idea actually isn't. By keeping them caged, crammed and confined, we then have to grow their feed elsewhere, on scarce arable land, using chemical pesticides and fertilisers. Factory farming's second side.

As crop fields expand in the wake of industrialisation, so the trees, the bushes and the hedges disappear, along with wildflowers. And when they disappear, so too do the insects, and the seeds; and the birds, the bats, the bees that depend on them. Even the worms disappear, along with soil fertility, leaving little else but the crop.

Then we take this crop and feed it to factory farmed animals, losing most of the food value of that crop, in terms of calories and protein, in conversion to meat, milk and eggs. In this way, we waste enough food to feed an extra four billion people on the planet. That's not to say that four billion extra people would be a good idea. It wouldn't; it would be an environmental disaster. It is to say that without industrial agriculture, we could feed everyone on less farmland, not more.



*Intensive farming
producing animal feed.*

Yet, instead of switching to more sustainable regenerative farming and reining in meat consumption, vested interests use growing population pressure to encourage more industrial agriculture, regardless of the fact that more than half our food is lost or wasted; with the biggest single portion of food waste on the planet being the feeding of human-edible crops to factory farmed animals.

To keep pace with this short sighted vision, by 2050 we will need an area of extra cereal cropland the size of France and Italy combined. Up to a fifth of the world's remaining forests are likely to be lost, including an area of tropical forest equivalent to much of Argentina.

Overwhelming nature

As humanity's footprint grows, agriculture encroachment, together with the further industrialisation of farming, causes irreversible damage to biodiversity, forests, soil and water. More wildlife extinctions follow. Nature is overwhelmed.

Conservationist and explorer, Derek Joubert, interviewed by National Geographic, noted that fifty years ago there were nearly half a million lions left in the world, and that every time the human population rises by one billion, the population of lions falls by half. "Today we're at 20,000 to 30,000 lions and the same is true for leopards, for cheetahs, for snow leopards," he said.

As nature retreats, she stops providing essential services like pollination, soil replenishment and carbon sequestration too.

Throughout human history, for better or for worse, *Homo sapiens* has outdone all-comers, from magnificent mammals like the bison that roamed the American plains in vast numbers, to birds like the passenger pigeons that once flocked like great rivers in the sky. Whatever has stood in our way, and sometimes just within reach, has been seen off.

Scientists now suggest that we have moved into our own geological era, the Anthropocene, where the major force shaping the planet is: us. Yet, before we become too congratulatory about our own ingenuity, we should realise that one of the greatest victims of the Anthropocene could be... us.

As Sir David Attenborough observed, there are few environmental problems that “wouldn’t be easier to solve with fewer people, or harder, and ultimately impossible, with more”.

Humanity currently faces some major problems. Scientists warn that we have 12 years to solve climate change. Pollinators essential for the very existence of a third of our food are in steep decline. Antibiotics, half of which we feed to farm animals to prop-up factory farming, could soon stop working. Wild fish stocks are set to be depleted within 30 years. And the UN itself warns that if we carry on as we are, we could have just 60 years of harvests left in the world’s soils.

At the heart of all these declines is industrial agriculture.

Key to the future

Yet there is another way.

The key to that better way lies in addressing all three components of humanity’s footprint: population, consumption and method of production.

A decent future for our children tomorrow relies on us starting a big conversation today about longstanding taboos, those elephants in the room around population pressure and the need to eat less meat.

It relies on embracing positive, life-affirming ethical solutions, like alleviating poverty and empowering women and girls worldwide: both seen as effective at addressing population pressure.

It relies on more balanced consumption; diets that don’t overdo livestock products, not least for the climate. Scientists tell us that if we carry on eating meat and dairy in the way we are, then our food alone could trigger catastrophic climate change. To stabilise the climate and save the natural world on which we all depend, there is a pressing need to reduce meat and dairy production by half.

On production, the key to better food lies with the world’s pastures; grazing animals like cattle and sheep instead of grain feeding them. By keeping animals on the land, in mixed rotational systems, we have a much more efficient way of producing food that genuinely adds to our global food basket, rather than factory farming, which takes away from it.

In this way, we have a recipe for better, more nutritious food for all, not just for today, but for future generations.

Clearly, this isn't about people versus animals. Far from it. I am not arguing for draconian population control. What I am saying is we need an urgent conversation about how to address all three parts of humanity's growing footprint.

And what's at stake? The future for our children.

Global Agreement

Nothing short of decisive action by the world's leaders will be enough: governments, business and the UN, working with civil society.

That is why, to save a world worth having for future generations, I call on the United Nations to forge a global agreement to create a regenerative food system without factory farming and excessive meat production.

We have nothing to fear from addressing these issues in way that empowers people to create a better future.

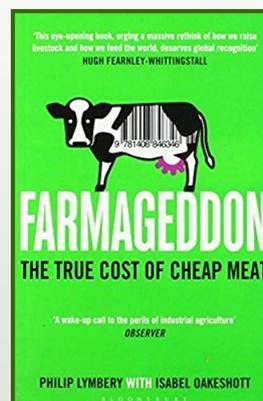
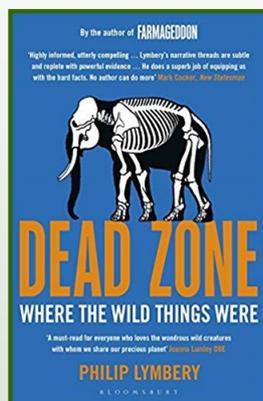
In fact, given the crisis facing food and the natural world, there is everything to fear from simply carrying on as we are. For our way of life to stay the same, a great deal has to change. As teenage climate activist, Greta Thunberg said, "...the rules have to change, everything has to change, and it has to start today."

We are, after all, the last generation who can hand over a planet worth leaving to our children.

Let's create that better future so that, whatever form newspapers take in the years to come, headlines talk of a positive future for people, animals and the planet. For our children, forever. ☸

For further information please see www.philiplymbery.com and www.ciwf.org.

Books by Philip Lymbery



Available on Amazon