

Sustainable Ideford A-Z

M is for Meat

It seems like everyone, from the UN to the Committee on Climate Change, is urging us to eat less meat. We all know by now that cows burp out a lot of methane, a very potent greenhouse gas, and we've probably heard that growing soya or grain for animal feed often involves destruction of the Amazon rainforest.

However, before we all turn vegan, it's worth taking a closer look at the facts, not least because so many of our farmers rely on beef, lamb or dairy production to make a living. 75% of Devon farmland is used as pasture, as most is unsuitable for growing crops.

It turns out that the impact on global warming of producing meat depends hugely on the way the animals are raised. US-style feed lots, where the cows are penned in a small space and fed entirely on cattle-cake, involve large emissions of CO² and methane, with nothing to offset them. But when cows or sheep graze on grass, the gases they give off are offset by the gases absorbed as the grass grows back. It's a cycling process from the grass to the animal, into the air and back into the grass and soil.

Because of this, some studies have claimed that pasture-fed meat is carbon-neutral, or even negative (as grazing encourages the grass to form deeper roots, storing carbon in the soil). Research at ten National Trust farms in 2012 found that the carbon footprint of farms where the animals were entirely grass-fed (pasture, silage and hay) was similar to that of conventional farms, but 94% of the emissions at the former were absorbed back into the grass. In some upland areas, the offset was greater than 100%.

Other studies, however, argued that even pasture-fed meat is environmentally damaging, or that on a global scale there is not enough land to meet the current level of meat demand using only pasture methods. If you want to dive into this debate, a good place to start is the Wicked Leeks article on the Riverford website, entitled "The truth about grass-fed".

What this shows is that simple messages are always misleading. Everyone has to make their own decisions. Some people are vegan because they don't like animals being raised for slaughter. For those of us who continue to eat meat, the best advice is to be careful about where it comes from. If you buy what's produced locally, it's likely that it will be partly or mainly grass-fed, or you can look for certification by the Pasture for Life Association. West Town Farm in Ide is one certified producer and you can find others on-line. You might also consider wild meat, given that we have an excess of deer which is damaging to our forests. Wild Hart Venison is one Dartmoor supplier – it is very reasonably-priced and delivers locally for free.

A final consideration is the health benefit of reducing consumption of red or processed meat. The NHS advises that if you average more than 90g per day (cooked weight), you should cut down below 70g. This is roughly one lamb chop or 1½ sausages. So dedicated meat-eaters might like to work in the odd meal of fish, or one of those spicy Vegan recipes!