

Diet for a Large Planet

Analysis by [Sally Fallon Morell](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Frances Moore Lappé's influential 1971 book, "Diet for a Small Planet," argues that meat production harms the environment and exacerbates global food scarcity, advocating for vegetarianism instead
- › Lappé highlighted that a significant portion of grain production and agricultural land is used for animal feed, contributing to hunger and malnutrition despite abundant food production
- › However, grazing cattle on non-tillable land can enhance soil health and support more livestock sustainably through managed grazing techniques
- › Animal products, particularly beef, are essential for preventing malnutrition and stunting, providing crucial nutrients like zinc, vitamins A, D, and B12
- › Intelligent farming practices that integrate animals and crops, which can sustain a larger, well-nourished population without corporate interference

I participated in the 2018 Long Island Food Conference, the lone meat eater in a lineup of speakers espousing "plant-based" diets. The keynote speaker was Frances Moore Lappé, whom you will recognize as the author of the very influential "Diet for a Small Planet," the 1971 book that convinced many to embrace a diet of grains and beans.

In the book, Lappé argues that meat production has a negative environmental impact and is a major contributor to global food scarcity. By practicing vegetarianism we can

help save the planet and feed the hungry, she claimed. Many answered the call. Several conference participants reported that they became vegetarians after reading her book.

(The recipes in the back of the book, and in the 1991 Twentieth Anniversary edition, updated with a long preface by Lappé, are cringe-worthy, containing margarine, skim milk, low-fat cheese, vegetable oil, eggless mayo, and lots of soy ingredients such as soy flour, tofu, soy grits, soy burgers and even unprocessed soybeans. I think Lappé gets the credit for introducing soy foods to the American public, but in her defense, no one at the time knew just how toxic they were.)

From Abundance to Scarcity: Lappé's Contradictory Keynote on Food Production and Malnutrition

Lappé began her keynote talk at the conference by declaring that food is abundant, that the world produces twenty-nine hundred calories per day per person. But people are hungry, she says, because one-half of all grain produced goes to animal feed and three-fourths of all agricultural land is used for livestock production.

She told the audience that in spite of increased food production, many in the world suffer from malnutrition, with one in five children stunted. Two billion souls lack at least one essential nutrient. She noted, as many have, the concentration of wealth and power in the food and agricultural industries, and the influence of lobbyists.

Corn and soy – used in vegetarian and vegan foods – get subsidized, a fact that she linked with the increase of diabetes from 1% in 1970 to 10% today. GMOs came in for special criticism, which she characterized as a “Giant Missed Opportunity.” She quoted a GMO scientist who said, “We brainwashed ourselves.”

Lappé decried what she called the Scarcity Mind and the presumption of lack. Instead, she proposes the “Eco Mind,” which recognizes the fact that in biology, everything is related, that there are no parts, only participants. Whereas the Scarcity Mind leads to concentration of power in agriculture, the Eco Mind aligns with the laws of Nature.

Interestingly, Lappé did not actually say that people should be vegetarians – which one participant told me is her call to arms at most conferences – but I don't think I have ever heard a presentation more contradictory, more brimming with mixed messages.

Managed Grazing: A Sustainable Solution for Livestock and Soil Health

Let's start with her Scarcity Mind message that we should not eat beef (or bacon). Everyone in the audience would agree that the current feedlot system, which treats the beef cow as a receptacle for cheap, subsidized corn, is an abomination. But it's really misleading to claim that using three-fourths of agricultural land for livestock production is a bad thing.

By some estimates, only 11% of the Earth's surface is tillable, that is, fertile enough for crop production; but a large portion of the rest supports animal production very well. In fact, grazing cattle and other animals on this kind of land will improve the soil and make it more productive if done right – that is, with managed grazing, which in the case of beef cattle, requires no grain, and in the case of dairy cattle, requires only small amounts of grain.

And with managed grazing, you can increase the number of cattle the land will support, some say by tenfold. In an article, Joel Salatin described his conversion of a two-hundred-acre farm from continuous grazing (where the cows mill around aimlessly on a large piece of ground) to managed grazing (where the cows are confined to a small area of pasture but moved every day, in imitation of Nature's grazing patterns).

Land that supported just thirty cows with continuous grazing, will support three hundred cows with managed grazing – and with environmental improvement rather than degradation. If the world farmed like this, then everyone could eat beef!

And that would certainly help with the main problem that Lappé mentions – that of malnutrition and stunting. Stunting is common in children who grow up on plant-based diets, mainly due to lack of zinc. And what is the best source of zinc? Why beef, of

course! Only animal products can supply those nutrients most missing in Third World diets – vitamins A, D and K2, B12, B6, iron, iodine and calcium, as well as zinc.

Nature's Blueprint: The Essential Role of Animals in Sustainable Farming

Lappé blames the increase in diabetes on subsidies for corn and soybeans, and the proliferation of GMO crops, but any diet based on grain, whether subsidized GMO or not, will predispose to diabetes, and of course, this is exactly what Lappé has been urging for the last fifty years.

The Eco Mind aligns with the laws of Nature, says Lappé, and what is the first law of Nature? It's this: Nature never farms without animals. In every part of the world where plants grow, animals are there; and even in places where plants do not grow, such as Antarctica, animals (namely penguins) not only grow but thrive. Throughout the world, animals and plants live in symbiosis; plants support the animals, and animals help the plants, mainly by recycling them into rich manure.

If we farmed according to the laws of Nature, we would have animals on 100% of agricultural land; on land suitable for grains and produce, we'd alternate crop production with grazing to fertilize the soil; we'd have ducks and geese in our orchards to get rid of pests, and pigs in our woodlands to clear them into silvo-pastures.

Beyond Corn and Beans: The Flawed Logic of a Limited Diet for Global Hunger

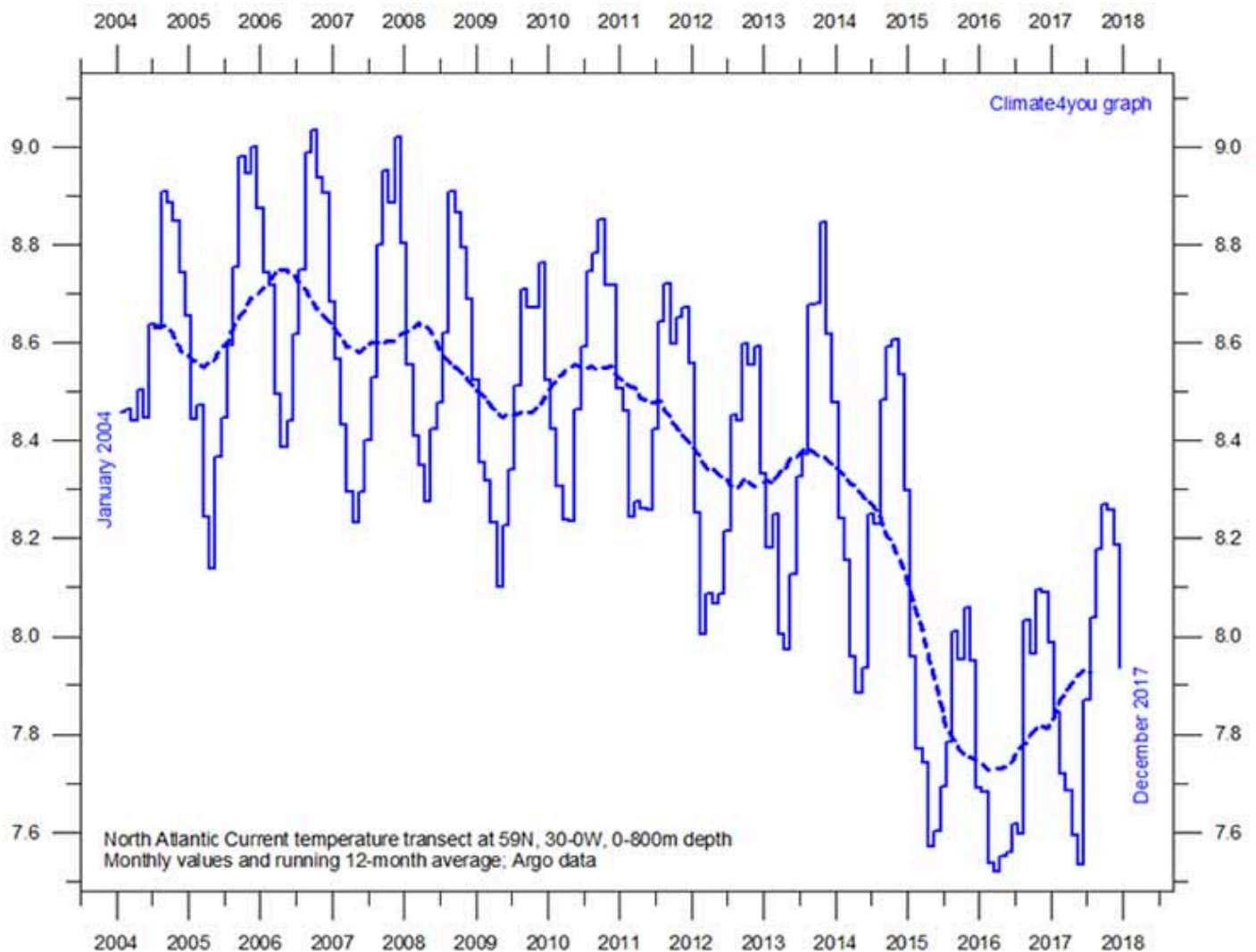
But Lappé's biggest contradiction is her premise that we live on a small planet with limited resources while claiming that at the same time that we are producing abundant food; and that because our planet is small and stressed, we need to eat an unsatisfying and limited diet so that others may eat.

How confining ourselves to a diet of corn and beans is going to help people in India and Africa have enough to eat is not explained. Of course, we could send the subsidized GMO corn that we otherwise would give to cattle to these areas, but that would only undermine local small farms, something Lappé would not condone.

The fact is, we live on a large planet, an immense planet that is fertile, abundant, plentiful, generous and gracious – especially if we farm intelligently in ways that nourish the soil instead of poison it.

It is not overpopulated – a claim brought up constantly throughout the conference – but capable of feeding many times more people than it currently does, and feeding them well, if we could just get the corporations out of the way.

Even in this age of mono-cropping and industrial farms, small farms still produce about 70% of the world's food – and all but the poorest of these farms support animals like chickens, ducks, pigs, goats, sheep and milk cows.



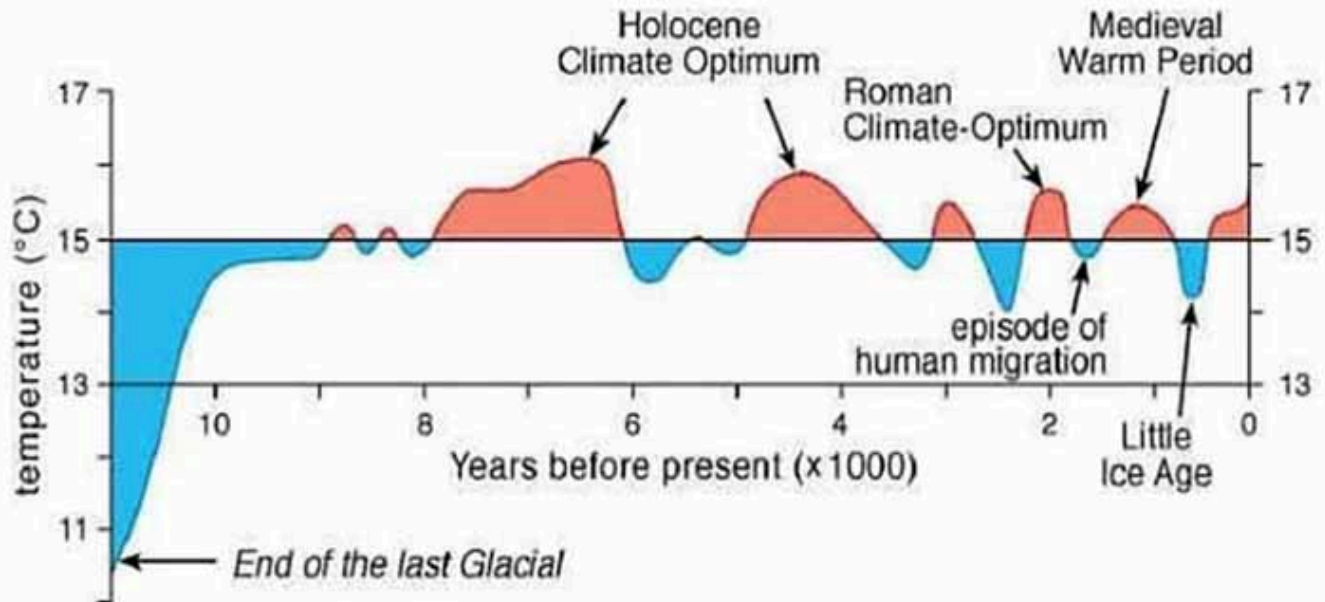
Questioning the Consensus: A Divergent View on Global Warming and Dietary Choices

At our booth I spoke with a lovely young lady who asked me about the Weston A. Price Foundation's position on global warming — since because of global warming, we need to eat a plant-based diet.

I told her that the Foundation doesn't take a position on that subject, but that according to what I have read, the Earth stopped warming in the late 1990s and now is in a cooling trend. I talked about the Medieval Warming Period, several hundred years of weather warmer than what we currently have, when vineyards flourished in Denmark and dairy farms dotted the coast of Greenland.

Then the climate turned cold and Europe experienced the Little Ice Age, when the Thames froze over every winter and lots of people starved for lack of food.

The Little Ice Age was a period of cooling that occurred after the Medieval Warm Period (Fig. 1). Global warming has happened repeatedly over time: periodical cooling cycles alternated with warming.



Graph as shown in Nurtaev and Nurtaev, 2017

Average near-surface temperatures of the northern hemisphere during the past 11,000 years (after Dansgaard et al., 1969, and Schönwiese, 1995)

Fig. 1. Holocene climate variability over the period of 11,000 years

I pointed out that these changes happened before industrialization, so man's activities can hardly be blamed – most likely climate change has to do with variations in the sun's activities.

In other words, we don't have to feel guilty for driving an SUV or eating bacon, but she disagreed. Ninety-seven percent of scientists support global warming, she said, so "everybody knows" that by eating meat instead of a plant-based diet, we are contributing to melting glaciers and rising seas.

Integrating Animals Can Reduce Waste and Nourish Communities

One of the tracks at the conference focused on food waste – another reason given for eating a plant-based diet. Certainly, the current industrial food system is hugely wasteful. Tristram Stuart, a former UK pig farmer turned crusader spoke about new technologies that can turn food waste into animal feed.

He is the founder of Toast Ale, a beer made with fresh surplus bread. One is justified in asking, what kind of bread goes into this beer? Does it contain dozens of additives, GMO grain and soy flour like most bread does?

What creates the most waste in our food system is the separation of animals into single-species CAFOs. With pigs concentrated in South Carolina and dairy cows concentrated in Wisconsin, what are you going to do with the whey leftover from cheesemaking and skim milk leftover from the manufacture of butter and cream?

These are waste products that don't nourish people but nourish pigs very well. And if pigs live on your farm, instead of in CAFOs, they can eat your kitchen garbage as well as whey and skim milk from the on-farm production of yummy, nourishing foods like cheese, butter and cream.

And if you have a brewery nearby, the pigs can get extra nutrition from spent grains. All these foods – garbage, whey, skim milk and spent grain – are free to the farmer so he doesn't have to purchase a lot of grain. Using this system, we can all feel good about eating that ultimate product of recycled waste – bacon!

*The **Weston A. Price Foundation** advocates supporting small, pasture-based farms by spending half your food dollar in direct sales with farmers. With the other half, you can celebrate how small the world has become.*

About the Author

Sally Fallon Morell is author of the best-selling cookbook “Nourishing Traditions” and many other books on diet and health. She is the founding president of the Weston A. Price Foundation (westonaprice.org) and a founder of A Campaign for Real Milk (realmilk.com). Visit her blog at nourishingtraditions.com.