Can Your Burger Really Save the Planet?

Choosing a veggie burger won't stop climate disaster, but here's why you should do it anyway.

Stephanie Feldstein posted Jun 26, 2019

Burgers have recently become a main course on the menu of climate action. Whether it's the Impossible Whopper, the promise of cell-based meat, or the debate over grass-fed beef, hamburgers—and how they're made—are being served as a symbol of how we can disrupt and reduce one of our greatest impacts on the planet.

But that doesn't mean the solution is as simple as changing what's on your grill.

Agriculture is responsible for up to 30 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. About half of that comes from livestock production, and the biggest culprit, by far, is beef production. Researchers say that countries like the United States will need to cut beef consumption by 90 percent to meet climate goals, so we need to find ways to quickly and dramatically reduce beef production.

Most of us are as distant from animal agriculture as we are from energy production. But while we don't typically get to decide where the power comes from when we turn on the lights, we do get to choose what we put on our plates—and Americans eat an average of three hamburgers per person every week. In American culture, burgers are tied to our holidays and identities. They're even used as a sign of freedom.

As a result, the race for the most climate-friendly burger feeds the narrative of consumer blame and simultaneously shows the promise of consumer power.

Just as fossil fuel companies work hard to make you believe the state of the climate rests on whether you take the bus or drive your gas guzzler to work, beef producers want you to think they're only producing the amount of meat that the public demands. The USDA even releases projections for meat consumption that are based on production and population size, not the amount of meat people actually want to eat.

The claim goes, if individuals just chose the right burger, we could slash our carbon footprints and fight climate change. But consumer choice is misleading: We can only choose from what's available, accessible, and affordable.

Our food system is driven by inequitable subsidies that favor animal agriculture, food deserts in low-income neighborhoods, and other policies that limit access to healthy, sustainable food. The meat and dairy industries receive millions of dollars in bailout money, while we don't grow enough fruits and vegetables to meet federal dietary recommendations.

A single burger can't change that. And shifting focus on individual choices—at the expense of holding corporations accountable—creates an atmosphere of guilt and shame. This blame game isn't just counterproductive. It also misdirects attention from the real culprits and stymies meaningful systemic change.

And it ignores the fact that not everyone can simply make greener lifestyle choices. From solar panels to fresh produce, the farther you get from privileged, white neighborhoods, the fewer choices you have. And in a system built around industrial polluters, the alternative sustainable options add up. As Mary Annaïse Heglar recently wrote, "all of this raises the price of admission to the climate movement to an exorbitant level, often pricing out people of color and other marginalized groups."

Yet, despite knowing the limited impact of personal choices, I still choose the veggie burger.

In a country that eats way too many burgers, this can be game-changing.

I'm a vegan, and I know that the hamburgers I used to eat didn't cause the climate crisis any more than they created the factory farming system the beef came from. And while I know I don't hold the blame for the climate impact of food on the end of my fork, I still believe I have opportunities for meaningful action with what I eat.

When I choose a veggie burger, I'm not only making a choice to reduce my own climate footprint. I'm taking a small stand against the meat industry's devastating impacts on land, water, and biodiversity. Against massive systems, overwhelming odds, and a government suppressing climate science as it hands out favors to polluters every chance it gets, being the change you want to see is no small thing. It can help stave off despair, while keeping the mind and stomach fueled for the fight ahead.

When I enjoy a plant-based burger, I'm helping normalize the idea, among my friends and family, that beef doesn't have to be what's for dinner. These choices can help shift our culture toward greater acceptance of plant-forward diets, which shifts toward making those options more widely available.

That opens the door for greater affordability, accessibility and innovation in plant-based foods. And it's working: A report from the global consultancy firm AT Kearny predicts that by 2040, 60 percent of meat products will be plant-based or lab-grown.

In a country that eats way too many burgers, this can be game-changing. Life cycle analyses comparing the Impossible Burger and the Beyond Burger to beef found that the plant-based patties are responsible for 89 percent and 90 percent fewer greenhouse gas emissions, respectively. The rise of these kinds of climate-friendly products is redefining the all-American burger to the point where even the meat industry is rethinking the future of meat.

Most people know that the climate crisis isn't their fault, but yet many of us feel that we've been complicit in bringing things to the tipping point. As a professional environmental advocate and the author of a book on activism, I'm often approached by strangers, acquaintances, and friends who tell me they feel helpless, like their voice is too small to be heard in the halls of power. They ask me what they can do in their own lives to feel like they have influence over something, anything to curb climate catastrophe.

So I tell them the truth: Their food choices have an impact.

It can boost our credibility as activists, which is important because the veggie burgers are only the first course when it comes to creating change. To shift toward a more equitable, sustainable food system, we need to push companies and policymakers to change the way food is produced and distributed.

There's a risk with personal choices that we do one thing and think we've done our part. But taking action to reduce the climate impact of your diet can also serve as inspiration to speak out about the changes needed to end our dependence on fossil fuels. If there's one choice we need to make right now, it's the choice to act.

Choosing the veggie burger won't solve the climate crisis. But it makes great comfort food as you have difficult conversations about how terrifying the climate crisis is and how huge the changes are that are needed. And while you're eating your burger and fries, you can plan your next step to stay in the revolution