

Environmental impacts of meat consumption low priority for Kiwis

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Researchers Garrett Lentz and Dr Sean Connelly of the University's Department of Geography along with Dr Miranda Miroso (Consumer Food Science) and Tim Jowett (Mathematics & Statistics) have been investigating the factors that could change attitudes towards eating meat. Credit: University of Otago

Many New Zealand consumers are unaware of the environmental impacts of their meat consumption and this may be influencing our high meat intake, according to a study by the University of Otago.

Researchers Garrett Lentz and Dr Sean Connelly of the University's Department of Geography along with Dr Miranda Miroso (Consumer Food Science) and Tim Jowett (Mathematics & Statistics) have been investigating the factors that could change attitudes towards eating [meat](#).

They found high costs of meat and potential health benefits to be the most prevalent motivations for reducing [meat intake](#), while environmental concern was one of the weakest incentives.

They believe a lack of connection between meat eating and its associated environmental impacts could potentially explain why it is not a big motivator for [consumers](#).

PhD student Garrett Lentz explains that research into consumer motivations, attitudes, and attachment towards meat is increasingly important as society grapples with the issue of how to feed a growing population in the coming decades without significantly degrading the environment in the process.

"It is clear that moving towards more plant-based foods could not only reduce the environmental impacts from animal agriculture, which include climate change, deforestation, pollution and biodiversity loss, but also create a healthier society that can feed more people with less resources," he says.

"Understanding consumers is a first step for potential change. Organisations and governments aiming to reduce meat consumption, no matter their motivation, will find it useful if they have a better understanding of what drives people away from or towards certain food products, like meat."

Mr Lentz hopes the research findings on the lack of environmental knowledge will help pinpoint what needs to be done next.

"Ways to increase knowledge about meat consumption's link to environmental impacts could be an important component to motivate dietary change in consumers."

Although shifting to a more plant-based diet may bring environmental and public health benefits, Mr Lentz says there are multiple barriers that may make it more difficult for consumers to shift their eating habits, particularly as meat is often a central component in many Western dishes.

"Efforts to reduce meat consumption across Western society therefore have to overcome personal barriers such as associations and attitudes towards meat, as well as systematic and cultural barriers that include meal structure, cooking skills and background, and nutrition beliefs," Mr Lentz says.

"As well as raising awareness of the issues related to producing and consuming animal products, we hope these findings provide practical information to understand how consumer knowledge, motivations, and attitudes towards meat can influence policy on reducing meat consumption."

The researchers believe this information may help policy makers understand meat consumption in New Zealand, while also offering some direction for strategies or policies, like a potential "meat tax" based on environmental [impact](#).

The researchers also hope this gets consumers thinking about where their food comes from and how it is produced.

"We want to raise questions about the environmental impacts of food from production to [consumption](#). Does my food contribute positively to the environment, my personal health, and to the greater well-being of

society?"

The researchers are not expecting the meat industry to be surprised by these findings.

"The future will likely be that of reduced [meat consumption](#), and companies will in turn have to shift their focus more towards providing quality rather than quantity," Mr Lentz says.

"The meat industry sees where future demand is headed, and we think most businesses are trying to get ahead of the curve; some traditionally meat-based companies have already begun to invest in more plant-based products.

"How quickly these shifts occur and how large they will be remains to be seen, but companies that have traditionally focused on producing large quantities of meat may have to shift towards producing more 'premium' products with low environmental impact and/or plant-based alternatives to remain competitive."

More information: Garrett Lentz et al. Gauging attitudes and behaviours: Meat consumption and potential reduction, *Appetite* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2018.04.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2018.04.015)

Provided by University of Otago

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