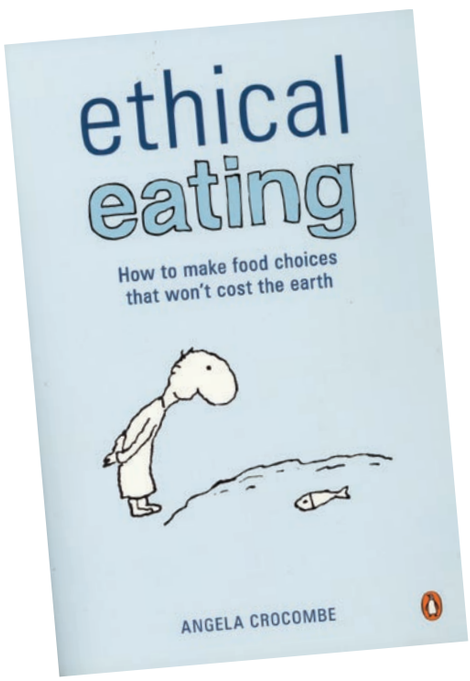
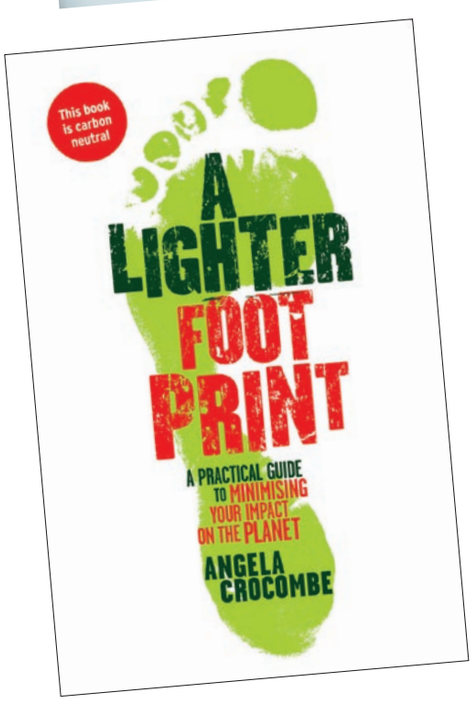
Ethical Eating

» Over a lifetime the average person takes in around 25 tonnes of food. The footprint that one meal can leave is substantial – add them all together and it is incredible the impact that you and your fork have the potential to make on the earth. With climate change at the forefront of world issues, backed up by a daily grind of environmental concerns, consumers are being encouraged to look ethically at what they put in their mouths. **Angela Crocombe**, author of recently published book Ethical Eating reports.





These days, most of us are concerned with living lightly upon the planet. What we choose to eat is a daily decision that has huge implications for the environment, animal welfare and, in particular, climate change.

Agricultural emissions represent nearly 16 per cent of Australia's total yearly greenhouse gases[1]. That figure does not include emissions from the extensive transport networks needed to shift our food around the country and across the world, nor the considerable packaging used for many food products. By making a few simple changes to the food we purchase and eat, we can easily reduce the emissions generated by our eating habits and contribute to a more environmentally sustainable system of food production. Making ethical food choices at least some of the time will not only help the planet; animal welfare and our own health also benefit.

Eat less meat and dairy

Meat is the agricultural product with the greatest impact upon climate change by far. Methane emissions from cows and sheep represent more than 10 per cent of Australia's total greenhouse emissions[2]. Meat production is highly inefficient, with (non-organic) feedlot beef requiring seven kilos of grain to obtain only one kilo of meat, pork requiring four kilos, and chicken the most efficient at two kilos of grain to one kilo of meat[3].

Grazing and growing crops to feed livestock now consumes 30 percent of the earth's land surface[4]. If the developed world cut the level of meat consumption, these crops and land would be better utilised in feeding hungry humans instead of animals, producing significantly less emissions. New Scientist reported on a study that found removing animal products from your diet could save significantly more fossil fuels in a year than swapping your car for a hybrid[5] and leading scientists recommend people in wealthy countries more than halve their daily meat intake to slow the pace of climate change[6].

By reducing dishes that include meat and dairy products to just a few times a week, or better yet, cutting them out altogether, you can significantly reduce the agricultural emissions you are directly responsible for, save money, and reap health benefits, since high meat consumption is linked to many diseases such as bowel cancer. Alternatives such as lentils and beans are a healthy protein source with minimal environmental impact.

Eat sustainable seafood

A quarter of global fish stocks have been overfished and a further 52 per cent are at maximum capacity[7]. The fishing catch has massively decreased over the last century and our oceans are in a state of crisis, yet many overfished species are readily available at the local supermarket. Destructive fishing practises such as bottom trawling and drift nets catch numerous non-target species, including dolphins, seals and turtles, which suffer injury or death.

Eating farmed fish may seem a better option, but aquaculture has its own environmental problems. Farmed Atlantic salmon and ocean trout are not native species and escapes from sea cages are common, potentially spreading disease to native populations. Sea cage aquaculture is also responsible for damaging delicate coastal ecosystems. Farmed fish eat large quantities of pellets made from small wild fish, stressing wild populations. To grow only one kilogram of Southern bluefin tuna requires up to 12 kilograms of wild fish and up to 70 per cent of this food is then washed into surrounding seas, along with antibiotics and excrement, polluting coastal waters[8].

To avoid contributing to unsustainable fishing, choose seafood endorsed by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), an international non-profit that sets environmental standards for wild-capture

fisheries. The tiny blue MSC logo, found on some John West, Talley's, Sealord and Bird's Eye fresh and canned seafood products, ensures that the product has come from a sustainable fishery. The Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS) also provides a list of fresh sustainable seafood options at www.amcs.org.au.

Choose organic

Modern farming, with its heavy reliance upon chemical fertilisers and pesticides, depletes the soil of carbon and nitrogen, with agriculture accounting for nearly 85 percent of Australia's nitrous oxide emissions[9]. Organic and biodynamic farming methods not only prohibit chemical usage, they

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actually increase carbon retention in the soil. According to an extensive US study, emissions from organic farmers can be between 40 and 60 percent less per hectare than conventionally farmed soils[10].

In organic systems, sustainability has a much greater emphasis and environmental externalities are significantly reduced. By-products such as water and manure must be handled on site, preventing pollution of nearby waterways. Animal welfare is a higher priority than in any other farming system, resulting in more humane livestock conditions. Numerous studies have also come out in favour of the health and nutritional benefits of organics, including a recent analysis of more than 100 peer-reviewed studies comparing organic and conventional foods, with a majority finding organic foods nutritionally superior[11]. Organic farming methods are definitely beneficial in combating climate change, with their food products a more sustainable choice for the environment and human health.

Eat locally and seasonally

While organic products generally have a much smaller carbon footprint, the distance a product has travelled must also be considered, as carbon dioxide emissions are generated during road, air and sea transport. Organic may not always be the best option when choosing between an organic food produced overseas and a conventional one produced locally. Many products in Australian supermarkets are so exotic they should have their own passport.

For example, edible grapes are harvested through summer and if you're eating grapes at any other time of the year, it's likely they've had a long trip — possibly from California. Air-freighted Californian grapes produce significant carbon emissions during the 12,000 kilometre journey. By purchasing foods produced within Australia, preferably within your own state, you can significantly reduce transport emissions. Eating with the seasons will also reduce emissions and be cheaper. Food in season is generally fresher, contains more nutrients, and tastes better.

Eat less processed and frozen foods

Processed food not only consumes far greater energy, water and other resources during production than fresh food, it is also more likely to be individually wrapped, bagged and overpackaged in energy-intensive plastics. Frozen food requires expensive refrigeration during transportation and storage, contributing to its carbon footprint.

Buying fresh food and cooking at home is a far more sustainable option than processed or frozen food, but beware of unnecessary packaging. Supermarkets are now regularly packaging fresh produce in cling wrap, polystyrene and other plastics. By buying fruit and vegetables loose, or in paper bags, you can avoid needless packaging. Purchasing durable foods in bulk can also reduce packaging and save money.

Don't forget to take cloth bags when you go shopping to avoid the dreaded plastic bag – a ubiquitous piece of litter that takes hundreds of years to break down in landfill. Of the 6.9 billion plastic bags consumed annually in Australia, only 3 percent are ever recycled at supermarkets.[12]

Ethical eating doesn't need to be arduous, expensive or restrictive. It just requires a little more consideration of the origins and production of your food, and a few more minutes in the kitchen. By following these principles at least a few meals each week, preferably all the time, you can reduce your own footprint and enjoy fresh, unprocessed, food with the peace of mind that it hasn't cost the earth.

Angela Crocombe is the author of Ethical Eating (Penguin, 2008, $24.95) and A Lighter Footprint: A Practical Guide to Minimising your Impact on the Planet (Scribe, 2007, $24.95).

Endnotes

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2 ibid.
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5 'It's Better to Green Your Diet than Your Car', *New Scientist*, 17 December 2005.
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7 'The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2006', Food and Agriculture Organization, p. 29.
8 Australian Marine Conservation Society at www.amcs.org.au/default2.asp?active_page_id=159.
9 Australian Greenhouse Office, p. 4.
10 The Rodale Institute, 2003, The Rodale Institute Farming Systems Trial at www.newfarm.org/depts/NFfield_trials/1003/carbonsequest.shtml.
11 Charles Benbrook, Xin Zhao, Jaime Yáñez, Neal Davies and Preston Andrews, 'New Evidence Confirms the Nutritional Superiority of Plant-based Organic Foods', The Organic Center, March 2008 at www.organic-center.org.
12 'Plastic Shopping Bags – Analysis of Levis and Environmental Impacts Final Report', Environment Australia, 2002, p. 7.

The Ecological Footprint

Taking into account more than just greenhouse gases, the ecological footprint measures the amount of biologically productive land and water required to produce the resources an individual or nation consumes and to absorb the waste that it generates. It is expressed as an area of global hectares and is calculated annually by the Global Footprint Network, based on national and international data. The ecological footprint of the average Australian is currently 7.8 global hectares, the fifth highest in the world, whereas the biological capacity of the planet is only 2.1 global hectares per person. You can quickly measure your own footprint with an online quiz at www.footprintnetwork.org and then take the quiz again after changing your eating habits to see how much you have reduced your emissions by.