

Thursday 5th November 2009

The Island

LEISURE

2

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3

christ church, Galle Face, celebrates 156 years of Worship



Stop meat eating, save the world!

For many years now India has been experiencing the problems of climate change. We lurch between terrible drought and unseasonal flood. The lentils I eat are now so expensive that they are a luxury. From an exporter of food, we have become an importer.

At the same time, we are the largest meat and leather exporting country in Asia. We are the largest milk producer in the world. The result is that we have no rain, no water, increasing heat, drying rivers and dying people.

Do you feel powerless as an individual to stop the world from dying, at the mercy of politicians and their endless games? Let me explain how you and I could turn this around immediately.

Methane and carbon dioxide are greenhouse gases which means their presence in the air traps heat and affects the earth's temperature and climate, making the planet warmer. As it warms, the climate changes and the glaciers melt. When the glaciers melt, the rivers first flood and then dry up.

The developed countries of the world are at fault for producing so much carbon dioxide and the developing countries like China, India and Brazil are being blamed for producing methane. In this political debate, we have stopped recognizing that this is one world and we are all going to die together.

Take methane. Its an easy problem to deal with. It is produced from 4 main sources - livestock and livestock manure, rice farming, coal mining and landfills. In all the international treaties that have come and are coming like the one in Copenhagen, the developing world has tried its best to keep methane out of the debate. And they have succeeded because the west is justifiably guilt ridden about their carbon dioxide emissions. But the time has come for both the developed and developing world to recognize that reducing methane is the quickest way to stop global warming.

Methane concentrations have doubled in the last century and by now they are 20% of all greenhouse gas emissions. While carbon dioxide emissions have increased by 31% during the past 200 years, methane has increased by 149%.

What makes methane so lethal is that it may be less than carbon dioxide but it is 23 times more efficient in trapping heat in the atmosphere than carbon dioxide. This means that a methane emission has 23 times the impact on temperature of a carbon dioxide emission of the same mass. Methane has a large effect for a brief period (8.4 years in the atmosphere), whereas carbon dioxide has a small effect for a long period. That means if we stop generating methane today, we will see the effect almost immediately.

The methane emissions for India, China and Brazil have doubled since 1990 and are expected to go up by 40% by 2020.

There is only one reason - and it is not an increase in coal mining or in landfills. It is because these countries grow animals for meat and milk.

In developing countries where people are told that to be rich is to eat dead bodies, the number of people eating meat and the amount they are eating every year has risen steadily. Between 1970 and 2002, annual per capita meat consumption in developing countries rose from 11 kilograms to 29 kilograms, according to the FAO. In developed countries, it has risen from 65 kilos to over 100 kilos. The annual global meat production will double from 229 million tons in 2000 to 465 million tons in 2050. In 2008, meat eating went up by 10%.

Meat eating increases both carbon dioxide and methane. Producing one piece of meat in a shop takes 60,000 calories of carbon dioxide producing energy - keeping animals, growing food for them, feeding them, transporting them, killing them, cleaning and packaging the meat, sending it by air-conditioned vehicles to the markets which keep it in freezers, and then in fridges at home, cooking the meat. Forests are cut in Brazil, China, Indonesia, India to graze the animals. These forests absorb carbon dioxide so we are cutting down carbon sinks for meat. Carbon dioxide increases because it takes 11 kilos of grain to make one kilo of meat and wheat, corn and soyabean is mechanized and fertilizer rich agriculture which burns fuel. In fact meat production produces 9% of the world's emissions of carbon dioxide.

Come to methane. Livestock produce 23% of all methane because the fermentation in their intestines produces methane gas in the animals and their manure. A single dairy cow produces between 550-700L of methane a day.

The world's top destroyer of the atmosphere is not the car or the factory - it is the meat eating human. And this monster is on the rise. The 400 page United Nations report has identified the growing herds of cattle/goats/pigs/sheep/chickens as the greatest threat to the climate.

Your mutton kofta is killing us all. Livestock produce more than 100 polluting gases, including more than two-thirds of the world's emissions of ammonia, the main cause of acid rain. Grazing has turned forests, pastures and mountain ranges

into desert. Cows soak up vast amounts of water; it takes 990 litres of water to produce one litre of milk. The pesticides, antibiotics and hormones used to treat them get into drinking water and endanger human health.

A meat eater contributes 1.5 tonnes more of greenhouse gases per year than a vegetarian. This means that your diet change will make more difference than if you sold your standard petrol car for an efficient hybrid car, which reduces annual greenhouse emissions by roughly one ton a year.

India's livestock of roughly 485 million contributes more to global warming than our vehicles - 11.75 million metric tons per year - up from 9 million metric tons in 1994.

These cattle, pigs and sheep, chicken, goats did not want to be born - you created them. They do not want to be killed but you kill them to eat. In the process, you are killing the planet. Their wind and manure are warming the world 23 times faster than carbon dioxide.

We cannot reduce carbon dioxide in India. The costs are large because it needs technology. The cost of reducing methane is nothing. Simply stop eating meat. Replace rice (which causes 16% methane emissions) with other natural grains like millet or oats that are much better for you than just giving you starch.

You cannot stop global warming by switching off the lights after you leave the room. It has no impact at all. It will take decades to invent technologies to bring in zero-emission fuel sources. After all this struggling and pushing, the world has only got 3% solar and wind energy to tackle carbon dioxide. But you can change your diet today.

If you stop eating meat, you will stop the Gangetic glacier from melting and the Ganges river will stop turning into a stream. So will the Yangtze and the Amazon.

Not only will you save the world yourself, you will stop so much poverty on the planet. You will bring better health, eliminate most cancers, free up masses of land for vegetables and grains, allow water for the poor - do you know that an average slaughterhouse uses 16 million litres a day - and one poor Indian family uses one litre. Take the power into your own hands. You do not need machines or governments or international treaties. You can stop it today by yourself.

Dr Rajendra Pachauri, head of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which last year earned the Nobel Peace Prize, says that the quickest way to stop the climate changing is by turning vegetarian. How simple it is. Maybe this is the ultimate lesson that nature is trying to teach us. Wickedness brings sorrow. Good begets good. Don't kill and Don't be killed.

To join the animal welfare movement contact gandhim@nic.in

