Environment-friendly diet – what is your carbon footprint?

Did you know that eating one portion of steak a week (85g) is carbon dioxide equivalent (CO_2eq) of driving 128.2 kilometers, by an average passenger vehicle?

Reference: https://www.omnicalculator.com/ecology/meat-footprint

Our food is linked to about 1/3 of all human-made greenhouse gas emissions so meal choices make a big impact. Researchers at Oxford University are asking the question, via a small scientific study, if food labels - that calculate the environmental impact of foods – could change food selection and ultimately the way that we eat?

Dr. Brian Cook is a Senior Researcher at the University of Oxford with an interest in all aspects of food systems. He leads the Health Behaviours work package of the Livestock, Environment and People (LEAP) project that studies behavioural interventions to help people make healthier and more sustainable food choices.

Before joining Oxford, he was a Senior Health Researcher for the Toronto Public Health department where he spearheaded the Toronto Food Strategy.

Cook is aware that the biggest global environmental impact will be to wean shoppers off of meat. In his study "Estimating the effect of moving meat-free products to the meat aisle on sales of meat and meat-free products: A non-randomised controlled intervention study in a large UK supermarket chain", Cook et. al studied the impact of prominent positioning of meat-free products into the meat aisle in a supermarket with a view to assessing change in weekly mean sales of meat and meat-free products.

The study concluded that prominent positioning of meat-free products into the meat aisle in a supermarket was not effective in reducing sales of meat products, but successfully increased sales of meat-free alternatives in the longer term.

The Birmingham headquarters of the food services business Compass Group, teamed up with the university for a trial at more than a dozen of its cafeterias across the UK, to see if

a label can change purchasing habits.

A label that summarizes multiple environmental indicators from greenhouse gas emissions to water use was affixed to the cafeteria products. The team analyzed the ingredients in every food item on the menu and gave dishes an environmental impact score A to E, paired with a small global symbol, coloured green, orange or red.

The Oxford team decided on four indicators for this trial's formula: greenhouses gasses, biodiversity loss, water pollution and water (bespoke calculations based on water scarcity at each growing region). They weighted each indicator equally in their equation for overall impact.

They found the most effective way to get people to not buy an item was to use a dark red globe symbol with the word "worse" on it. Almonds, for instance, are a great example of food selection vis. a vis environmental impact score. They are a healthy choice and low in some environmental indicators but then you review the water requirements used in harvesting them and the scale tips over.

Cook gives presentations to policy-makers in the UK and reports great interest in labels. Let's hope we see them on products sooner rather than later.

Reference:

Estimating the effect of moving meat-free products to the meat aisle on sales of meat and meat-free products: A non-randomised controlled intervention study in a large UK supermarket chain

https://www.phc.ox.ac.uk/team/brian-cook