

A New Veganism: How Climate Change Has Created More Vegans

MSc Leanne Cooper, University of Aberdeen, Department of Sociology

ABSTRACT

Discussion and debate about climate change and global warming are everywhere; politics, newspapers, social media. But what about in diet? In 2016 the Vegan Society commissioned research to discover how many vegans currently live in the UK. The research found that over half a million people follow a vegan diet or lifestyle, three and a half times more than in 2006. This surge in popularity is being driven by people aged between 15-34 years who are becoming more aware of the realities of factory farming and the implications of meat and dairy on their health and the environment. Whilst veganism will remain a tenet in the fight against the exploitation of animals and a rejection of speciesism, a new kind of veganism seems to be emerging where motivating factors in the shift to veganism are around environmental or health concerns. This short paper, based on a 20-minute presentation, will briefly discuss the livestock industry and its part in climate change and how this in turn has led to rising numbers of vegans in the UK, and how veganism could be a potential answer in the fight to combat climate change. The paper will end with a discussion about my own research into veganism. Firstly, I will discuss my MSc dissertation on a qualitative study where I looked at vegans' motives and adherence. Eight out of 12 participants from this research said environmental concerns were a motive for their veganism. Secondly, I will discuss how my PhD research has and will be affected by what looks like a turn in veganism from ethical to environmental, and the questions this raises. This paper will discuss how veganism has been placed in the climate change conversation, my previous findings, and how I plan to negotiate a new kind of environmental vegan in my sociological research.

Keywords: Vegan; veganism; climate change; environment; diet; animal agriculture

Granite

pp. 16-24

ISSN 2059-3791

© Cooper, May 2018

01 Introduction

02 Climate Change

03 Veganism

04 My Research

05 Conclusion

Introduction

Climate change is ubiquitous, it can feel like an immense task to combat but recently actions taken to tackle climate change can be seen in certain individual choices, notably diet. This short paper will look at how vegan diets are being adopted in order to tackle climate change generated through animal agriculture and how this, in turn, has affected my own PhD research.

Climate Change

In November 2006, the report *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options* was published by the United Nations (UN), looking at the impact on the environment caused by the livestock industry. The report found damning evidence that animal agriculture is a major contributor to serious environmental problems. Some of the most impactful findings claimed that:

“the livestock sector generates more greenhouse gas emissions [GHGE] as measured in CO₂ equivalent – 18% – than transport”; [...] “herds cause wide-scale land degradation, with about 20% of pastures considered as degraded through overgrazing, compaction, and erosion”; [...] [and] “15 out of 24 important ecosystem services are assessed as in decline, with livestock identified as a culprit” (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations 2006).

These statistics evidently show that the livestock industry is having serious, noticeable, and damaging effects on the planet.

Research conducted since *Livestock's Long Shadow* has found that of all the habitable land on the planet, 45% is used for factory farming and pastures (Animal Equality 2015); 15% more than originally reported by the UN. It has also been reported that the original GHGE statistic of 18% annually is far from accurate. Goodland and Anhang (2009) found “livestock and their byproducts actually account for at least [...] 51% of annual worldwide GHG emissions” (p. 11). The low figure may have been generated because sources of GHGE in animal agriculture are “underestimated, some are simply overlooked” (Goodland and Anhang 2009, p. 11). It is also estimated that 70 billion animals are produced for food annually (Compassion in World Farming 2013; Animal Equality 2015). Thus, animal agriculture, it would appear, “is fundamentally unsustainable” (Compassion in World Farming 2013, p. 5).

Veganism

According to The Vegan Society, veganism is:

“A philosophy and a way of living which seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practical – all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals” (The Vegan Society n.d.).

Veganism is an all-encompassing way of life, a philosophy which aims to reject mainstream carnism ideology (Joy 2010) with a “renunciation of anthroparchal socialisation” (Cole and Stewart 2014, p. 151). Veganism is the rejection of a system that only benefits humans.

In 2016, The Vegan Society conducted nation-wide research on the prevalence of veganism in the UK. Research was only conducted with people over the age of 15 years, and so this does not even take into account children who are vegan through choice or people raising their children as vegan. It was estimated there are around 542,000 people who class themselves as vegan in the UK. This figure has grown from 150,000 in 2006, roughly three and a half

times in 10 years, and is “making veganism one of Britain’s fastest growing lifestyle movements” (The Vegan Society 2016). The majority of those making up this rapid increase in popularity are young people; 41% of those identifying as vegan are in the 15-34 age category (The Vegan Society 2016).

As mentioned above, veganism is a philosophy in which adherents take no part in the exploitation of animals. Veganism has always taken the “suffering and slaughter of animals [as] the starting point” (de Boo 2014, p. 6) and fighting against the exploitation of animals remains a principle motivation for veganism. However, the identity and ideology of veganism has expanded in the mainstream to no longer being exclusively concerned with animal advocacy. Studies have found that environmental (Beardsworth and Keil 1993; Fox and Ward 2008; Kerschke-Risch 2015; Janssen et al. 2016) and health (Beardsworth and Keil 1991; Fox and Ward 2008; Dyett et al. 2013; Hoffman et al. 2013; Kerschke-Risch 2015; Janssen et al. 2016) concerns are big motivators in the transition to and maintenance of a vegan (and vegetarian) diet and lifestyle.

What’s the Connection?

So far, negative effects of the livestock industry and a brief description of veganism have been discussed in this paper. But what is the connection, and why is discussion including the two important? If we look at this from a vegan standpoint, the connection between protecting the planet and veganism is longstanding. In de Boo’s (2014) historical record of The Vegan Society, she states that:

“Vegans were early proponents of what we now call environmentalism and green issues. For vegans, the lifestyle encompassed a natural way of living that respected not just sentient beings but the very planet we inhabit” (p. 8-9).

This sentiment is echoed in a 1962 issue of *The Vegan* that states “[v]eganism remember man’s responsibilities to the earth and its resources and seeks to bring about a healthy soil and plant kingdom and a proper use of the materials of the earth” (de Boo 2014, p. 9). Fundamental to the vegan philosophy is the recognition of our impact on the planet and its resources.

As some environmental problems generated from animal agriculture and their impact on the planet have been touched upon, it is also important to discuss the issue of waste (actual bodily waste from animals in livestock, as well as regarding resources being wasted) and how veganism can help tackle it. Animal waste/liquid manure’s impact is comparable to chemicals; waste that can’t be used as fertiliser causes severe nitrogen pollution of water; and animal agriculture is responsible for 70% of freshwater consumption (Baroni et al. 2007, p. 284-285). It is also pertinent to note fossil fuel usage and wastage in the meat and dairy industry. Production of one calorie of beef requires 40 calories of fuel; one calorie of milk needs 14 calories of fuel (Baroni et al. 2007, p. 285). This is where veganism can and does play a vital role, because it only takes 2.2 calories of fuel to generate one calorie of grain (Baroni et al. 2007, p. 285). Veganism has a lower fossil fuel footprint than a diet that includes meat and dairy, and in this regard it can help alleviate some of the stresses on the planet whilst reducing exploitation to animals.

Taking a closer look at people’s diets, and thus dietary impact, can also give another angle to highlight how the livestock industry contributes to climate change. Baroni et al. (2007) carried out an in-depth study into the hypothesis that planet-based diets are more environmentally-friendly than meat-based diets. The main findings were that:

“the ‘normal’ diet based on products from chemical-conventional agriculture [...] turns out to have the greatest environmental impact, whereas the vegan diet based on organic products [...] turns out to have the smallest environmental impact” (Baroni et al. 2007, p. 283).

Consuming a diet that includes meat, dairy, and eggs has a significantly higher negative impact on the environment than consuming a vegan diet. This sentiment is echoed by Macdiarmid (2012) who states that “[f]ood and dietary choices can have an impact on the environment in many ways, such as climate change, land, water and energy use, biodiversity, [...] and GHGE” (p. 14). In essence, people’s dietary intakes play a major role in the production of GHGE and thus contribute to climate change. It should be noted that in the UK, dietary intakes “accounts for approximately 20-30% of total annual [GHGE], with the greatest contributors coming from high intakes of meat and dairy products” (Macdiarmid 2012, p. 13).

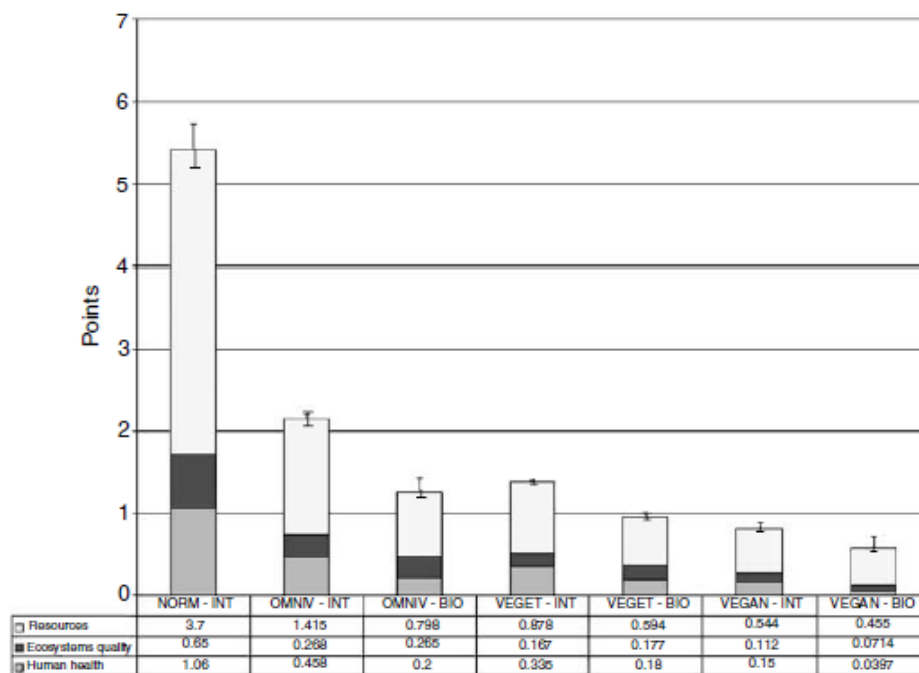


Figure 1: Average environmental impact (Baroni et al. 2007, p. 284)

My Research

In 2016 I carried out qualitative research for my MSc dissertation, “You Do Your Best”: The Challenges of Practice vs Ideology in Veganism. An Exploration of Accounts (Cooper 2016). Taking a sociological lens to the accounts of vegans’ deviant practice, I looked at lived experiences of misperformance of vegan practice as well as strategies employed in order to justify actions. This research built on Greenbaum’s (2012) work on authenticity and concessions in vegan practice. My study also looked at motivations for being vegan and I questioned whether motivations related to or dictated adherence.

Participants were asked to choose, out of 'ethical', 'health', 'environmental', or 'other', what their motivations for veganism were. Participants could also chose more than one motivation and could number them from most to least important. Of the 12 people interviewed, 11 stated they had an ethical motivation for being vegan. However, eight of the participants also stated that environmental concerns were a reason for their veganism.

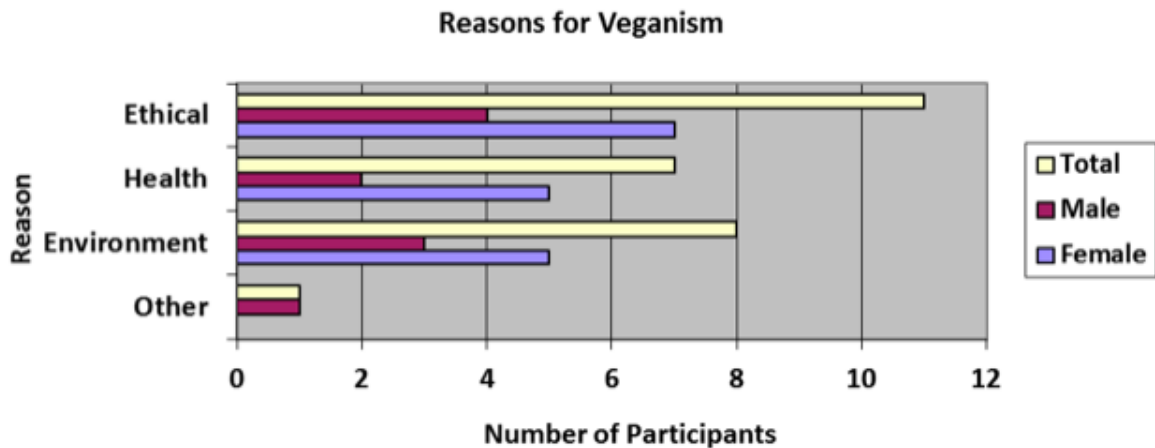


Figure 2: Reasons for Veganism (Cooper 2016, p. 44)

Analysis of interviews (Cooper 2016, p. 61) demonstrate interest in environmental concerns and how this links to veganism:

“For me it is a logical choice for sustainable human existence. [...] I think I grew up in a time when the ozone was a big issue. [...] I feel my veganism is a part of a move towards a sustainable planet” (William).

“[E]nvironmental, since the carbon emissions involved could eventually cause vast suffering through climate change” (Jack).

“I also am really big into the environment [...] in the sense that meat and dairy production has a greater environmental impact than plants” (Virginia).

Participants educated themselves on causes of climate change and chose to act through the practice of veganism. Animal agriculture is “ecologically damaging and resource-extravagant compared with the production of plant foodstuffs” (Beardsworth and Keil 1993, p. 229) and, like the participants, Fox and Ward (2008) state that “dietary choice is one element of a wider concern to redress this negative impact” (p. 427) on the planet caused by climate change.

My PhD research aims to expand on my MSc research and take a more in-depth look into the lived experiences of vegans. But, back to the issued posed at the beginning of this paper: how has climate change affected my own research? Below I will briefly discuss participants, data collection, and literature and how climate change has inadvertently altered these elements of my research.

Participants

The main question that needs to be established is, 'who is vegan?' When carrying out recruitment for my MSc I simply advertised for vegans, but what about people who may not actually call themselves vegan, who do not adhere to a vegan philosophy, who are vegan for non-ethical reasons. There are also those who would prefer to be labelled as plant-based or some may wish to have no label or identity at all linked to their diet. This issue is raised by Janssen et al. (2016) who states that there is a need to establish a clearer distinction between "animal-related and environment-related motives for following a vegan diet instead of summarising the two into ethical motives" (p. 649).

Data Collections

New methods of recruitment may be needed, such as advertising at places that are not vegan-orientated. Interview questions may also need to be tailored depending on the type of participant I am interviewing. The analysis of the data collected may also need to be coded differently, such as by motivation.

Literature

I have already looked into a wider range of food-related topics, such as clean eating and organic labelling. Other areas that will need to be consulted in order to provide broader knowledge will include environmentalism, diet and climate change, and sustainable and ethical consumption.

So, why is this important? People now have different motivations for being vegan, and so people have different meanings and understandings of what veganism is. Does the word vegan even apply any more to my research? I use the official Vegan Society's definition, so does this mean I should exclude environmental but non-ethical 'vegans' from my research? As discussed, there are a number of issues and questions that need to be unpacked and examined before my research can move forward.

Conclusion

This short paper began with a brief discussion of animal agriculture and some statistics on its damaging impact on the planet. I then discussed veganism and, furthermore, explained the link between climate change and veganism and how the former has led to a surge in the latter. I rounded off the paper with a discussion about my MSc research, and how climate change has, in fact, affected my own PhD research on veganism.

Thankfully, more research on veganism is emerging. In the past three years, there have been journal articles covering topics such as transitioning (Andreatta 2015; Twine 2016; Twine 2017), lifestyle (Cherry 2015; Radnitz et al. 2015), practice (Twine 2017), motives (Radnitz et al. 2015; Janssen et al. 2016), identity (Stephens Griffin 2017), athletes (Rogerson 2017), law (Rowley 2016), consumption (Doyle 2016), gender (Thomas 2016), and celebrity (Doyle 2016). There are also books (Wright 2015; Castricano and Simonsen 2016; Stephens Griffin 2017) that critically discuss a wide range of issues relating to veganism. All of this is progressive and timely research, but as academics we also need to work towards a more nuanced approach to who is vegan and what veganism means in the age of tackling climate change.

References

- Andreata, M. M. (2015) 'Being a Vegan: A Performative Autoethnography', *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies*, 15(6): pp. 477-286.
- Animal Equality (2015) 'The High Price of Factory Farming', *Animal Equality*, 13 November 2015. [Online] Available at: <http://www.animalequality.net/node/775> [Accessed 1 March 2018].
- Baroni, L., Cenci, L., Tettamanti, M., and Berati, M. (2007) 'Evaluating the environmental impact of various dietary patterns combined with different food production systems', *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 61: pp 279-286.
- Beardsworth, A. D. and Keil, E. T. (1991) 'Health-related beliefs and dietary practices among vegetarians and vegans: a qualitative study', *Health Education Journal*, 50(1): pp. 38-42.
- Beardsworth, A. D. and Keil, E. T. (1993) 'Contemporary Vegetarianism in the U.K.: Challenge and Incorporation?', *Appetite*, 20(3): pp. 229-234.
- Castricano, J. and Simonsen, R. R. (eds.) (2016) *Critical Perspectives on Veganism*. Palgrave Macmillan. Springer [Online] Available at: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-319-33419-6> [Accessed 10 March 2018].
- Cherry, E. (2015) 'I Was a Teenage Vegan: Motivation and Maintenance of Lifestyle Movements', *Sociological Inquiry*, 85(1): pp. 55-74.
- Cole, M. and Stewart, K. (2014) *Our Children and Other Animals: The Cultural construction of Human-animal Relations in Childhood*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.
- Cooper, L. (2016) "'You Do Your Best": The Challenges of Practice vs Ideology in Veganism. An Exploration of Accounts', MSc Thesis. Aberdeen, UK: University of Aberdeen.
- Cooper, L. (2017) 'A New Veganism: How Climate Change Has Created More Vegans', *Between Using and Abusing Our Planet: How Climate Change Affects Our Fields of Research*, Granite Symposium, University of Aberdeen, 20 November 2017. [Online] Available at: <https://prezi.com/view/H36SBJiihgo92Ngh7aZr/> [Accessed 12 March 2018].
- Compassion in World Farming (2013) 'Strategic Plan 2013-17: For Kinder, Fairer Farming Worldwide'. [Online] Available at: https://www.ciwf.org.uk/media/3640540/ciwf_strategic_plan_20132017.pdf [Accessed on 8 March 2018].
- de Boo, J. (2014) 'Ripened by human determination: 70 years of The Vegan Society', *The Vegan Society*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.vegansociety.com/sites/default/files/uploads/Ripened%20by%20human%20determination.pdf> [Accessed 10 March 2018].
- Doyle, J. (2016) 'Celebrity vegans and the lifestyling of ethical consumption', *Environmental Communication*, 10(6): pp. 777-790.
- Dyett, P. A., Sabaté, J., Haddad, E., Rajaram, S., and Shavlik, D. (2013) 'Vegan lifestyle behaviors. An exploration of congruence with health-related beliefs and assessed health indices', *Appetite*, 67: pp. 119-124.
- Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (2006). 'Livestock is a major threat to environment', *FAO Newsroom*, 29 November 2006. [Online] Available at: <http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2006/1000448/index.html> [Accessed 10 February 2018].
- Fox, N. and Ward, K. (2008) 'Health, ethics and environment: A qualitative study of vegetarian motivations', *Appetite*, 50: pp. 422-429.

- Goodland, R. and Anhang, J. (2009) 'Livestock and Climate Change: What if the key actors in climate change are... cows, pigs, and chickens?' *World Watch Magazine*, November/December 22(6). [Online] Available at: <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/6294> [Accessed 1 March 2018].
- Greenebaum, J. (2012) 'Vegan, Identity and the Quest for Authenticity', *Food, Culture and Society*, 15(1): pp. 129-144.
- Hoffman, S. R., Stallings, S. F., Bessinger, R. C., and Brooks, G. T. (2013) 'Differences between health and ethical vegetarians. Strength of conviction, nutrition knowledge, dietary restriction, and duration of adherence', *Appetite*, 65: pp. 139-144.
- Janssen, M., Busch, C., Rödiger, M., and Hamm, U. (2016) 'Motives of consumers following a vegan diet and their attitudes toward animal agriculture', *Appetite*, 105: pp. 643-651.
- Joy, M. (2010) *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism*. San Francisco, CA: Conari Press.
- Kerschke-Risch, P. (2015) 'Vegan diet: motives, approach and duration. Initial results of a quantitative sociological study', *Ernährungs Umschau*, 62(6): pp. 98-103.
- Macdiarmid, J. I (2013) 'Is a healthy diet an environmentally sustainable diet?', *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 72(1): pp. 13-20.
- Radnitz, C., Beezhold, B. and DiMatteo, J. (2015) 'Investigation of lifestyle choices of individuals following a vegan diet for health and ethical reasons', *Appetite*, 90: pp. 31-36.
- Rogerson, D. (2017) 'Vegan diets: practical advice for athletes and exercisers', *Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition*, 14(36), pp. 1-15.
- Rowley, J. (2016) 'Veganism as a protected belief in UK human rights and equality law: some thoughts on the proposal for a British Bill of Rights and Brexit', *International Vegan Rights Alliance*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.theivra.com/parliament.html> [Accessed 10 March 2018].
- Stephens Griffin, N. (2017) *Understanding Veganism: Biography and Identity*. Gewerbestrasse, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- The Vegan Society (2016) 'Find out how many vegans are in Great Britain', *The Vegan Society*, 17 May 2016. [Online] Available at: <https://www.vegansociety.com/whats-new/news/find-out-how-many-vegans-are-great-britain> [Accessed 10 March 2018].
- The Vegan Society (no date) 'Definition of Veganism', *The Vegan Society*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.vegansociety.com/go-vegan/definition-veganism> [Accessed 10 March 2018].
- Thomas, M. A. (2016) 'Are vegans the same as vegetarians? The effect of diet on perceptions of masculinity', *Appetite*, 97: pp. 79-86.
- Twine, R. (2016) 'Negotiating social relationships in the transition to vegan eating practices', in Potts, A. (eds.), *Meat Culture*. Brill. pp. 243-263.
- Twine, R. (2017) 'Materially Constituting a Sustainable Food Transition: The Case of Vegan Eating Practice', *Sociology*, pp. 1-16.
- Wright, L. (2015) *The Vegan Studies Project: Food, Animals, and Gender in the Age of Terror*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.