

JUST NEEDED A CATALYST

Having written pieces both satirical and pointed about human diet choices, it is the ABC's Catalyst series 'Feeding Australia – Foods of Tomorrow' that was the catalyst I needed to get off the starter's block to express to all Beef Central readers just what a human population of nearly 8 billion need to farm to be the most efficient users, not wasters, of our planet's resources.

Surprise, surprise but once again the ABC's research and reportage in the catalyst program was woeful in its cherry picking of discredited 'science' and its obvious bias. What the bright blonde reporter and her 'experts' – chef Paul West (who isn't on my radar of Australia's leading chefs); Ahmed an ex medical student who wants to bypass domesticated herbivores and go straight for the grain (because he once saw/visited a slaughter house probably in the Middle East) and Dr Noby Leong (a chemist who admits to having no sense of taste) get very happy-clappy about are plant foods grown in hothouses or on massive mono-cultured landscapes.

First, let's look at the quoted 'science' which claimed it takes 15,000 litres of water to produce 1kg of beef. This is pretty old stuff that came from the UN and has been called out on many occasions for being shoddy. It purports to be a Life Cycle Analysis that includes the irrigation required to produce the 'grains' that go into cattle feedlots. What is missing here is that most grain production targets are the muesli bowl, the loaf of bread, the pasta...with grain trash/stalky residue and poor quality seed heads that would otherwise be waste being used most efficiently to feed cattle, poultry and pigs in either free-range or intensive agricultural settings.

In fact the US feedlot industries were born of a corn glut in the early 60's when farmers, in desperation as to what to do with all their unsold grain hit upon the idea of feeding it to their livestock. As a huge supporter of keeping grazing animals doing just that I am not a proponent of feedlots but recognize the dissembling that places the efforts of grain production (especially water) at the hooves of our preferred meat animals rather than at the pasta (inheritor of massive irrigation effort), bubbling away in yet more water. But the bald-faced ignoring by the Catalyst team is that in Australia most livestock production is free-range throughout life; with some cattle finished off in 3 month feedlot programs (approximately 1/5 of the animals' life) and a small percentage targeting specific markets spending longer in feedlots - all of which efficiently recycle the waste of the vegetarian side of the human diet.

Those cattle, sheep, goats that spend their lives grazing inherit the rain - natural precipitation that also waters grassland plant species; supports other vertebrates and all manner of invertebrates and occasionally makes it to our river systems so that it can then be taken up by the lettuce, rice, corn, nut/fruit tree, cotton, berry and grape growers. When it doesn't rain then we have the images of dying stock, on barren soil – costing our planet nothing in water – but adding their decomposing bodies to the soil for future use.

Next we had a piece about eating insects which, once again, stems from an old paper titled Bugs R' Us. Quaint and attention grabbing as it does address that we humans, as omnivores, can eat anything from Bogong moths to grasshoppers but avoids that this is only a 'must-do-to-survive' basis. We do not choose such a menu when there are alternatives such as the ABC-maligned beef. It

also ignores that the act of stir-frying, deep-frying and even chocolate coating grasshoppers is an added cost in energy and supporting food sources. But then the ABC Catalyst team would have to actually think this through all by themselves.

The upshot of this Future Foods series was that it was OK to eat heavily irrigated mono-cultured cereals, salad lines and anything from a plant as well as the critters that go for plants (the ones that haven't had insecticide sprayed on them to repel and kill these and the invaluable pollinators) or feed ourselves from hothouses with manipulated soils, in elevated beds supporting tomatoes, spinach, cucumbers et al. The problem is that we don't know what we are missing from what are real, out in the landscape soils as we don't even have names for some 90% of soil life. Soil is where all food begins and is quoted by Prof. E.O.Wilson (the man who came up with the word 'ecosystem') as having a biomass greater than all of life from the soil surface up – including all the forests, whales, humans, insects, terrestrial, arboreal and avian species – so the chance that we can find all the many trace elements our bodies need from hot house soil beds is unlikely. Only time will show-up dietary deficiencies.

As always there is the big bogey of ruminant methane while ignoring that horticulture's NKP fertilisers foster nitrous oxide, 10 times more 'warming', while destroying soil-based methanotrophes that are Nature's end game for methane.

But the real issue is value. Being tax-payer funded the ABC ignores value gained for effort in so here is some accounting: from the flesh of cattle we get our needed amino acids, bio-available haeme-iron, a raft of essential VitBs, VitA, potassium, cholesterol, magnesium, calcium, phosphorous, sulphur + dairy; we also get hides, leather, bristles as well as casein and tallow; tools from bones, blood and bone and manure fertilisers and in some countries cattle are the haulage/tractor system. The big item, however, in adding up the value of animals we have lived off for millennia is their biomedical by products such as serum, blood elements, hormones, collagen and tissues to name just a few. Beef is just the by-product.

So just what do we get from lettuce? It isn't even a good food... just a huge waste of water and rich soil.

Deb Newell