MASS EXTINCTION

Meatless meals are vital in helping nature thrive

Pamela McElwee *Guest Columnist*

How can the average American comprehend the warnings of a worldwide ecological crisis, let alone take action to reverse it?

Up to a million of the world's plant and animal species are at risk of extinction within decades unless we transform the way we manage nature, and check our rampant consumerism and unsustainable economic growth, according to the recent findings of the United Nations-backed Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

At stake is not just the survival of pandas and elephants in far-off places, but our own well-being. Humanity depends on other species for cleaning the air we breathe, purifying the water we drink and pollinating the food we grow. But we are overloading natural ecosystems with our demands, with 75% of the Earth's usable land area now "severely altered" by human action.

The size of the problem is enough to overwhelm the average person into inaction. What can we do? As one of 145 scientists from 50 countries who served as lead authors of the report, I've been asked this question numerous times since our summary was issued recently in Paris.

Fortunately, individuals can make a difference. The largest single driver of biodiversity loss is land-use change, such as the conversion of diverse wild forests into single-crop agricultural fields. That means consumer decisions about what to eat plays a crucial role.

We can shift to sustainable diets that are less dependent on meat. Worldwide consumption of meat has doubled in the past 50 years, leading to the expansion of pasture lands and increased grain production for livestock, which degrades biodiversity and contributes to climate change. Eating more meatless meals is one of the most important steps an individual can take. I personally walk the talk: I have not eaten red meat since I was a teenager.

Second, we can pay attention to food waste. We throw away about a third of all food produced globally and in the U.S. Eliminating that waste would reduce the pressure to expand agricultural production into additional ecosystems. Quiz your grocers about the steps they take to minimize food waste, and ask restaurants to consider options for smaller sizes to cut down on uneaten leftovers. Minimize your own food waste by tracking your family's eating and buying habits.

We can demand policy actions at the local, state and federal levels. Procurement rules requiring school districts buy large volumes of sustainably produced food can create incentives for farmers to produce in biodiversity-friendly ways. An even more serious step would be the removal of government subsidies that hide the environmental costs of meat and food production.

We can use our pocketbooks to reward corporations that provide consumers with clear, accurate labeling about the environmental impacts of food and other products, including standards such as "organic," "sustainably harvested" and "zero deforestation."

Finally, we can change our value systems. Why do we value emerald green lawns that require us to plant non-native species, dump toxic chemicals and use energy to grow? Would a shift in aesthetics allow us to see the beauty in patches of unruly native grasses brimming with butterflies and bees?

Why do we value infinite consumer variety when there is strong evidence that too many choices make us unhappy? Would changing our economic tastes to value experiences over material consumption encourage us to spend more time with our families and less time shopping for disposable stuff that wastes natural resources?

To solve the looming extinction threat, we need to fundamentally rethink our relationship to nature and regard it in new ways. We need to spend more time in nature and advocate for it in our communities, even if we live in dense urban settings. We need to incorporate biodiversity into every decision we make, from where to grow food to how to produce energy to where we live and what we buy, if we want people and nature to thrive.

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FEEDBACK

Columnist inconsistent

viding us with ever more complete knowledge of human life?" Yes, take