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## Why do environmentalists eat meat?



A study by researchers at the ICTA-UAB analyses the reasons why environmentally-minded scientists find it difficult to give up meat consumption, one of the world's greatest environmental problems. Scientists do not believe in individual actions and prefer to rely on politics and technology.

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Environmentalists question the effectiveness of individual actions and believe that changes for the sustainability of the planet will come in the future from politics and technology. This is the main conclusion of a study carried out at the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (ICTA-UAB) which analyses the reasons why environmentally-minded scientists are not capable of giving up meat even when knowing about its important environmental impact.

Reducing meat consumption is an important way to reduce our environmental impact, including carbon emissions. Despite being a sustainability priority, convincing people to give up meat is difficult. Many scientists, including those who are aware that eating meat is bad, do not become vegetarians. Why do people who care for the environment and for animals continue to eat meat?

This situation, called 'the meat paradox', demonstrates that people do care about the impacts of meat, but continue to eat meat due to the 'attitude-behaviour' gaps. People believe they should do something to protect the environment, but then they do not act on their beliefs. So far,

scholars have argued that people deal with such 'cognitive dissonance' by changing either their attitudes or their behaviours. In other words, in the case of meat, either they convince themselves that eating meat is not that bad, or they eventually become vegetarians.

However, the study carried out by Evon Scott, graduate of the master's degree SAES at ICTA-UAB (and led by the author, ICREA research professor at ICTA-UAB Giorgos Kallis, and UPF researcher Christos Zografos), starts from the premise that people have consistent reasons for doing what they do. We interviewed meat eaters at ICTA-UAB and identified the different viewpoints their interviewees used to explain why they eat meat. The study *Why environmentalists eat meat* has been recently published in the journal *Plos One*.

The main narrative of the interviewees is that they believe change will come in the future from politics or technology, not from their own actions. In other words, they did not believe that whether they eat meat or not was all that important, given that the problem was one of 'capitalism' or one of finding new technologies. Other interviewees thought the issue was too complex for their change to make a difference, while yet others appreciated that in theory they had to change and become vegetarians, but then conceded that they enjoyed eating meat too much and could not give it up. The study concludes that people have sound reasons for their actions, or simply learn to live with their contradictions.

This rethinking of the attitude-behaviour puzzle could extend beyond meat-eating, to problems such as climate change, where also many people think one way yet act another. People may consider their unsustainable actions as consistent with their pro-environmental beliefs, without the need to modify either one or the other in order to reduce incongruence, unlike what previous research has claimed. People may simply think that whether they fly or not does not make that much of a difference, as climate change is a problem of 'capitalism', 'politicians', or could be solved in the future with new technologies.

If this is true, then a different policy and communication strategy may be needed to convince those who already know that there are negative implications to their actions, but do not believe that changing what they do will make a difference. This strategy should not focus so much on informing people about the impact of their own actions, but rather on convincing them that changes in their individual behaviours can be important to change the dominant culture and social rules, and thus form part of the political and technological transformation.

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### **References**

Scott E, Kallis G, Zografos C (2019) **Why environmentalists eat meat**. *PLoS ONE* 14(7): e0219607. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0219607>

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