

How much beef consumption can our planet sustain?

Burning the Amazon to produce more cattle

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Getty Images

The Amazon is burning, and it isn't an accident. The 40,000 rainforest fires in Brazil alone this summer began mostly as intentional burns to clear land for cattle ranching.

It's an ancient practice—one now prohibited by Brazilian law. President Jair Bolsonaro has encouraged it anyway. Bolsonaro is openly hostile to environmentalists, to indigenous people and their protected lands in the Amazon, and to the international community's concerns. His alliances are with Brazilian business—including the country's powerful beef industry.

Brazil is the world's largest exporter of beef, accounting for almost a fifth of global exports. Much of this beef now goes to Asia; a pending trade deal would open European markets as well, making Brazilian exports grow bigger still.

Producing beef at this scale has involved trampling on indigenous land rights. This summer, indigenous groups called for a boycott of companies with supply chains

that violate protected areas—a list that includes large ranches and all the major Brazilian beef processors. All that slash-and-burn ranching has been environmentally devastating as well, both for local communities and for global climate.

And deforestation is just one of the environmental hazards of industrial beef. Worldwide, the United Nations reports that 14.5 percent of greenhouse gas emissions come from livestock—almost two-thirds of them cattle. They emit methane, a far more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. Then there is all the grain and water involved in raising cattle, which would nourish humans far more efficiently if it did so directly.

The problem is not beef production itself so much as its runaway scale. Smaller herds can be raised sustainably—grazed on pasture, their waste used directly to fertilize crops. Meanwhile, plant-based foods are often raised quite unsustainably. (In Asia, a major slash-and-burn culprit is palm oil.) The primary environmental issue with beef is not a personal ethical question about whether we should ever eat it. It's a collective question: How much beef consumption can the planet sustain? The answer is plain: a lot less than the status quo.

The beef industry is fueled by more than just consumer demand. In Brazil it relies on unenforced environmental standards and in the US on federal subsidies. In fact, in some places consumer demand is pressing the food industry in a different direction. A new wave of plant-based meat-like products—burgers, especially—has taken both supermarket fridge cases and fast-food menus by storm. Perhaps the developed world's appetite for beef will finally start to trend down. That would be a significant gain for the environment, in the Amazon and everywhere.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Amazon burns to feed the world's beef habit."