

How now, brown cow, can you be greener?

Ecology

Polly Ghazi reports
on the crisis caused
by too many livestock.

FIFTY million acres of Latin American rainforest have been denuded to provide food for the cow since 1970. In Nepal, half the forest of the Himalayan kingdom has been felled to feed domestic animals.

'An alien ecologist observing ... Earth might conclude that cattle is the dominant animal species in our biosphere,' writes biologist David Hamilton Wright of Georgia University.

In fact, domestic animals now outnumber people by three to one, with livestock occupying half the world's land. As a result, the global livestock industry — spurred by government subsidies and a growing consumer demand for meat — is causing massive environmental degradation.

A report by the influential Washington-based Worldwatch Institute catalogues the hidden environmental effects of the expanding animals market that has seen meat production almost quadruple in the past 40 years.

In industrialised regions such as western Europe, highly intensive farming has produced huge grain and manure mountains. The Netherlands, Belgium and France in particular, are being hurt by excess manure, which damages river wildlife and poisons water supplies with nitrates. Spain and

Portugal are also afflicted by degraded land starved of nourishment by overgrazing.

In Africa, claims the Worldwatch report, 'Taking Stock: Animals and the Environment', overgrazing has degraded 73 per cent of the continent's vast, wild rangelands.

The decline has been generated by booming human populations combined with misguided development policies. Together these have encouraged a massive expansion of crop plantations while limiting the areas grazed by traditional nomadic herdsmen.

Destruction of the world's wildlife-rich forests — another major environmental concern — can also be laid at agriculture's door. Alan Durning and Holly Brough, environmental researchers for Worldwatch, say: 'Real estate speculation and ranch subsidies have made pasture expansion the single largest cause of tropical deforestation in Latin America.'

The report calls for the full ecological costs of domestic animal production to be evaluated just as industry is for harmful

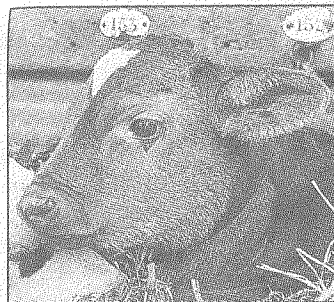
emissions and production processes.

Livestock damage to the environment would include overgrazing, water pollution and emissions of methane, a potent gas contributing to the greenhouse effect. If these costs were taken into account when setting prices, the cost of meat would double or triple, argue the authors.

Domestic livestock have not always posed such a threat. Traditionally, farm animals played an important role in sustaining the land, grazing fallow fields and returning nutrients to the soil as manure. But the massive expansion of factory-style farming has upset the ecological balance.

Since the mid-century, human numbers have doubled to 5.4 billion while the number of four-legged livestock — cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, horses, water buffalo and camels — has grown from 2.3bn to 4bn. In addition, the number of domestic poultry has multiplied from 3bn to nearly 11bn.

The Worldwatch report warns that, with the world's population estimated to reach 8bn to 14bn before it stabilises, it would be impossible to have enough livestock to provide meat for all. Instead, it argues for cutbacks in animal agriculture to reduce both environmental damage and too much meat-eating by wealthy nations. Measures to achieve this would include an end to subsidies for livestock farming.



Milking the land: The cow.

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