

Six Ways to Save the World

If you want to change the world, change what you eat. Food is one area of your life where small modifications can have a big impact. For one thing, you probably eat three or four meals a day, so any decision you make is multiplied a thousandfold over the course of a year. Second, the industrial food system is so far-reaching that by opting out of it even partly, you can have a positive impact on biodiversity, global warming, oil exploration, fisheries, your water supply, community stability, family welfare, your health and appearance, and the beauty of your regional landscape. There are dozens of ways to get involved. For starters, here are six changes that can make a huge difference.

1. Value food.

Perhaps the hardest challenge is to rethink the price tag you place on food. For generations American housewives prided themselves on trimming their grocery bills; today groceries remain the item we look to first when money gets tight. But this custom no longer makes sense. Fifty years ago, food represented 20 percent of a household budget; today it's less than 10 percent. Meanwhile, expenditures for televisions and sound equipment have nearly doubled in the past 15 years (thanks, no doubt, to all those flashy flat-screen TVs and DVD players); spending on personal care items has increased by half; and our use of cosmetic surgery has increased sixfold in a decade. Food is too important to be the target of budget-slashing. "We've been brainwashed that food should be cheap," says California chef and food activist Alice Waters. "We have to decide that people are precious and food is precious."

2. Avoid packaging and processing.

Buy more corn on the cob than corn chips; more chicken than chicken nuggets. As Paul Roberts writes in *The End of Food*, "The energy used to make a pound of breakfast cereal from wheat ... is about 32 times the amount needed to make a pound of flour from the same wheat, and in many cases, companies use even more energy packaging the food than making the food itself."

3. Buy local.

Shop farmers' markets, or become a member of a CSA (community-supported agriculture) farm; in return for an seasonal fee, you'll get a weekly share of the harvest. You'll not only acquire the freshest food possible but also support open pastures, fields, and farmlands and help keep farmers in your community. Visit LocalHarvest.org for CSA options near you.

4. Choose organic.

Even though the USDA has moved toward broadening the definition to include some farming practices that critics think shouldn't qualify, this label still stands for reduced chemical use.

5. Eat less meat.

Corn-fed cattle require eight to 10 pounds of grain to produce a pound of edible beef—a staggeringly poor return on investment. Moreover, grain-fed, pen-raised animals consume half of all the antibiotics used in America, and livestock is a bigger source of greenhouse gases than the transportation sector. Opt for grass-fed, pasture-raised beef, lamb, pork, and poultry, and make it a biweekly dish, not a nightly one. And if you worry that your health will suffer, consider this: According to the National Institutes of Health, most Americans already get more than enough animal protein—a single seven-ounce serving is as much as a woman needs in a day. A container of yogurt, beans and rice, some peanut butter, or a couple of eggs are good alternatives to go toward meeting your daily requirement.

6. Cook—and eat—together.

Americans are eating more calories nowadays than ever before, and spending less time and energy preparing food. The typical household devotes about 30 minutes a day to cooking, half as much as we did in 1970. Quick, convenient meals have liberated women from the kitchen, but the hidden costs of processed foods are devastating our health and that of the environment. And the replacement of the family dinner with grab-and-go microwave meals is linked to a variety of social problems, ranging from teenage drug use to depression. But eating wholesome foods doesn't have to chain anyone to the stove, either. A head of broccoli can be sautéed with garlic in the same amount of time it takes to boil up a box of macaroni and cheese. A few pounds of tomatoes will slow-roast in a barely warm oven all day while you tend to other things. And don't forget the original fast foods: an apple, a plum, a carrot, some nuts. They'll satisfy your cravings—and your conscience.

Source: Celia Barbour