

**Numbers matter. They can tell you, in undeniable terms, things you may not really want to hear.**

In the UK, beef farmers often talk about how climate-friendly their product is, compared to beef from overseas where forests are razed to create pasture. The problem is that, in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, even the best beef is seven times worse than the worst tofu. Not too fussy about where your beef comes from? The difference is even more stark: the worst beef causes more than 100 times the emissions of the best tofu.

What about organic meat – surely that’s good for the environment? Afraid not: the cost of the climate damage caused by organic meat production is just as high as that of conventionally farmed meat. Why? Because organic livestock are not fed imported fodder and are often grass-fed, meaning they produce less meat and grow more slowly, spending longer emitting climate-heating methane before slaughter.

Ah, but surely eating local produce is helpful at least. Not if the climate impact of your food concerns you. As Hannah Ritchie at Our World in Data reports, the transport of the food eaten in EU diets was responsible for just 6% their emissions, while meat, dairy and eggs accounted for 83%. As Ritchie puts it: “What you eat is far more important than where your food travelled from.”

Let’s move on from food. Recycling is good, like brushing your teeth, and we should all do it. But in terms of cutting the emissions driving the climate crisis, it’s tiny compared to, say, avoiding a flight. For example, you would have to recycle for more than seven years to match the emissions you would save by forgoing a single transatlantic trip.

Talking of transport, let’s look at electric cars. “Too expensive” is the frequent cry – and indeed the purchase price today is usually higher than a conventional petrol car. But if you look at the cost of owning and running an electric car over four years, it’s been cheaper than the fossil-fuelled version since at least 2017 in the UK, US and Japan. That’s because of lower fuel costs, depreciation and taxes, as well as subsidies. Yes, electricity prices have risen recently. But for the majority of UK drivers, who charge their cars at home, it’s still half the price they would pay for petrol or diesel per mile.

What about all that lithium you have to mine to make the batteries? All mining can be environmentally destructive, of course, and all steps should be taken to minimise this. But it’s perverse to worry about lithium mining while ignoring the 99.99% of metal mining that is not lithium. The same goes for the rare earth metals needed for renewable energy technologies, such as wind turbines: they make up 0.006% of all metals mined.

Furthermore, electric cars and renewable energy are being used to replace the colossal amounts of fossil fuels that are being mined and drilled at enormous environmental cost. Ritchie also puts this well: “We will need to mine millions of tonnes of minerals to transition to low-carbon energy. But we’re currently mining billions of tonnes of fossil fuels every year.”

While we're on energy, let's talk about that old canard about wind turbines and birds. According to US data, wind turbines have killed about 234,000 birds a year. Sounds like a lot and care should certainly be taken in choosing wind farm sites. But it's tiny compared to the mass cull by cats, which killed 2,400,000,000, or about 10,000 times more. The data is from 2013, since when wind power in the US has roughly doubled. So cats are still killing roughly 5,000 times more birds than wind turbines (and there are some simple things you can do to curb your cat's killer instincts).

Of course, numbers are not everything. Fighting environmental crises requires taking on vested interests and social injustice in a difficult geopolitical world. But when working out the most effective actions to champion, running the numbers certainly helps.

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