

# Foodprints for the Future — Earth Day 2020

*Patti Roth*

*This is the fourth in a series of six articles about Earth Day Network's five campaigns for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day.*

On the first Earth Day in 1970, 20 million Americans took to the streets to protest environmental degradation, launching the modern environmental movement.

The novel coronavirus pandemic has forced the cancellation of many 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary events, and others have moved into the digital sphere. But one campaign — [Foodprints for the Future](#) — is all about changes you make at home.

## Ecological Foodprints

Most people are familiar with the concept of an ecological footprint — one's impact on the environment, expressed as the amount of land required to sustain their use of natural resources.

“So many people are talking about mitigating the climate crisis and all these things that we can try to do. But food is never at the forefront of it. You can't talk about ways to mitigate the climate crisis if you don't talk about our agricultural system and animal agriculture in particular,” said Jillian Semaan, director of food and environment at [Earth Day Network](#).

Food has a tremendous environmental impact. The impact of growing, producing, transporting, and storing food is called a *foodprint*. [Our World in Data](#) reports that food production accounts for 26 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, 70 percent of global freshwater use, and 78 percent of global water pollution.

## Foodprints for the Future

Many factors, such as access, affordability, health, and culture, influence our food choices. No single prescribed diet can work for everyone, so Earth Day Network [launched](#) Foodprints for the Future last year to highlight the different ways individuals and institutions can make an impact on their foodprints.

“With Foodprints for the Future, we really want to be able to allow folks to connect their food choices to climate change, how what we are consuming really does affect the planet,” said Semaan.

## Foodprint Factors

The two biggest steps people can take to reduce their foodprint are to eliminate animal products from their diet and reduce food waste. In 2018, the journal *Science* published the most [comprehensive study](#) to date of agriculture's environmental impacts. They concluded that meat and dairy only provide one-fifth of the world's calories and a bit more than a third of the protein. Yet they use 83 percent of farmland and produce 60 percent of agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, about [one-third](#) of the world's annual food production goes uneaten every year. That wasted food accounts for 8 percent of human global greenhouse gas emissions. Some of that loss happens along the supply chain, but the USDA estimates [Americans waste](#) \$218 billion dollars' worth of food every year — about 400 pounds per person, approximately \$660 each.



Most Americans are surprised to learn that a vegetarian diet will save them money. Image: Jennifer Schmidt, Unsplash

## Public Perception

Earth Day Network partnered with [Yale Program on Climate Change Communication](#) to survey Americans about their understanding of food's relationship to the environment. Their February 2020 [report](#) found that fewer than 5 percent of Americans have committed to a vegetarian or vegan diet. However, more than half of Americans are willing to cut down on red meat and eat more plant-based food. Yet, most of them rarely or never hear about the topic in the media or talk about it with friends or family. Nearly two-thirds reported having never been asked to eat more plant-based foods.

Some of the results surprised the researchers.

“Most Americans think that a meat-based meal is less expensive than a plant-based meal,” said Semaan. “That was intriguing to me personally. After I was astounded by it, I took a step back and could see that. Yes, in some places, asparagus is \$4.99 for a bunch.”

For people who are not familiar with vegetarian meal planning, the relatively low prices of vegetarian staples like beans and tofu may not be obvious. As a result, most Americans are surprised to learn that a vegetarian diet can [save about \\$750](#) in grocery costs per year.

## Learning Tools

Earth Day Network is working on creating webinars and tutorials to replace in-person events. But in the meantime, you can explore their existing foodprint resources. Start by [calculating](#) the impact of your own diet and reading about how food production [impacts](#) climate change. Then try to incorporate their suggested [hacks](#) for moving toward a plant-based diet.

Semaan suggests that incremental change is best for creating new habits that last. For most people, trying to make a major lifestyle change all at once results in giving up.

“I would recommend going plant-based once a week. We have a pledge on our website to do just that,” said Semaan. “I wouldn’t recommend to just give everything up at once, because for the average person that’s not realistic.”

*Feature image courtesy of Photo by [Gunel Najafzade](#) on Unsplash*

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