

More than meats the eye in fight against global warming

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SINGAPORE - If you want to do your part to stave off global warming, you might want to forgo that juicy steak instead of a stonking sport utility vehicle.

Discredited as they are, passenger cars actually contribute only 12 per cent to global carbon dioxide emissions, according to estimates culled from the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the European Parliament.

If you include the CO₂ released when each car is manufactured, the percentage goes up to no more than 15 per cent, assuming each car is used for 10 years.

Believe it or not, livestock matches the global warming impact of cars. According to calculations based on figures from the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the meat and milk people consume account for about 10 per cent of man-made greenhouse gases.

In short, for every demonised Mustang, there is a holy cow. Cattle is by far the chief contributor, accounting for 65 per cent of livestock emissions, according to the FAO.

The 10 per cent figure excludes nitrous oxides, which make up 29 per cent of livestock greenhouse gases. This exclusion is so that there is a closer apple-to-apple comparison as the other minor greenhouse gases emitted by cars are not included.

The most devastating component in livestock emission is methane, which accounts for 44 per cent of the cocktail for burps, farts and faeces of animals, as well as the resources which go into growing them.

This cocktail is primarily why people who profess they love the countryside keep their windows up as they drive there.

Rocket scientists aside, not many people know that methane is a far more powerful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. Within a 20-year span, methane has been estimated to have 20 to 80 times the warming effect of CO₂.

Because of this, the global warming impact of livestock can be bigger than that of cars. How much bigger depends on, among other things, the comparison timeframe.

As the human population continues to grow, and as countries become more and more affluent, demand for meat and milk will increase.

According to an April report by the MIT Technology Review, a magazine owned by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, meat consumption is set to reach a new high this year despite a more modest-than-usual rise of 1 per cent.

The growth trend is expected to resume its steep climb towards 2030, when total meat consumption is predicted to reach 350 million tonnes (that's a lot of Big Macs) - up from about 220 million tonnes in 2000. The growth will be the fastest among low- and middle-income countries, the report notes.

As such, the impact of livestock on global warming cannot be overlooked.

Tackling the methane menace could potentially be a daunting task for governments. For it is far more difficult to curtail culinary habits than commuting ones. A certificate of entitlement for chickendoes not seem viable to me. And tofu, for many, may be as unpalatable as public transport is for drivers.

This does not diminish the importance of reducing CO₂ emissions, though. Unlike methane, carbon dioxide sticks around indefinitely.

So, people should still strive to decarbonise transport - by reducing their mileage, choosing more efficient vehicles (like compact electric vehicles), carpooling, telecommuting, imposing tighter restrictions on the movement and idling time of freight vehicles, meeting on Zoom instead of zooming to and fro across the globe.

In the same vein, people who care about receding glaciers should perhaps alter their diets as well. The biggest culprit on the menu is beef, which has the highest carbon intensity among all farm produce.

Some 300kg of CO₂-equivalent goes into producing 1kg of beef protein. That works out to using an average family car for 24 days. Or eight days if that car is electric.

Think about that the next time you sink your knife into a slab of ribeye.