

No, cows are no climate killers

Anyone who advocates giving up meat to save the planet is making a mistake in their reasoning

by Klaus Alfs*



Klaus Alfs.
(Picture ma)

"Nobody seems to be interested anymore in the fact that it is modern, conventional agriculture and not organic farming that secures harvests and reliably feeds billions of people." In his column, Klaus Alfs explains why the accusation that

cows are climate killers is based on an error in reasoning.

The practical thing about climate change is that you can use it to criticise anything you don't like. Groups that want to assert their power interests without argumentative ballast are well advised to beat others to the punch with the climate cudgel and hit the victim so often that any resistance becomes futile.

As early as 1971, *Frances Moore Lappé's* best-seller "Diet for a Small Planet" propagated vegetarianism as the only way to ecologically save the planet. Animal rights activists such as bioethicist *Peter Singer* were able to build on this seamlessly while the dairy and meat industries were still blissfully complacent.

As a result, agriculture, including livestock farming, is now unquestioningly labelled as a climate killer, even though it is the only significant economic sector that not only emits greenhouse gases but also binds them. The fact that it is modern, conventional agriculture and not organic farming that secures harvests and *reliably feeds billions of people*¹ no longer seems to interest anyone.

Ruminants, of all things, are said to be particularly bad for the climate. *Martin Luther* asked his guests at the table with concern: "Why don't you burp and fart? Did it not taste good to you?" Today, cattle, sheep and goats are pilloried in the



Cows use the grass from the alpine pastures.
(Photo Unsplash/@jkalina)

climate pillory for their unabashed belching. Too much methane! Away with the cattle!

In Ireland, the government has already considered slaughtering 200,000 cattle to appease the climate god. The cattle farmers were to receive 3000 euros per slaughtered animal. The Danish government is proud to be the first country to *introduce* a direct greenhouse gas tax on livestock.² Around one hundred cities around the world have come together to form the "C-40 Group"³ as part of the UN's 2030 Agenda to tackle the climate crisis. The ambitious goals include *zero consumption of meat and dairy products by 2030*.⁴

Streaming instead of eating?

A little research reveals that the *Food and Agriculture Organization* of the United Nations, in its publication "Livestock in the Balance", makes cattle farming responsible for four per cent of *global emissions*.⁵ This corresponds to what is also *attributed to digitalisation*.⁶ The streaming of videos has a particularly strong impact here.

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Only in a parallel universe, where food in vegan organic food shops is produced by primary production, is watching *Netflix* more important than the production of high-quality food. But are there any initiatives to ban streaming? Are there model cities that want to reduce digitalisation to zero by 2030?

This is not “whataboutism”, but a subtle hint that the wrong priorities could be set in the climate issue. The claim that domesticated ruminants are harmful to the climate lacks any evidence or plausibility. Methane from livestock cannot be chemically distinguished from methane from other sources, so there is nothing to prove or disprove here by direct measurement. Methane also remains in the atmosphere for a much shorter time than carbon dioxide, and its impact on the climate has been *overestimated by a factor of three to four in the past*.⁷

Instead of getting lost in modelling calculations, we should switch on our brains. Where are the largest cattle herds? In Brazil. Is the concentration of methane in the atmosphere particularly high there? *No*.⁸ It is highest where natural gas is produced and pipelines run. It is also high in the *tropical forests in the Congo Basin*⁹ and in the *Amazon*.¹⁰ This is because methane is not only produced without atmospheric oxygen but is also *produced by the plants themselves*.¹¹

The shot backfires

It is worth remembering that even before the invention of livestock farming, large herbivores populated the planet and emitted a corresponding amount of methane. Just think of the megafauna with gigantic herbivores. These have been *replaced* by domesticated species. If the latter were removed, wild variants would take their place.

In the Serengeti, for example, populations of wild ruminants exploded *after livestock farming ceased in the 1950s*,¹² meaning that there are far more “methane guzzlers” there than before. This backfired and could also backfire globally. If there are enough predators, wild herds are more densely packed than the grazing cattle and form themselves into “factory farming”. According to biologist *Allan Savory*, the *management of densely packed livestock herds*¹³ would be the solution to the climate and nutrition problem. However, this would require an overall increase

in livestock numbers of 400 per cent! No wonder that Savory is regarded by vegetarians as the incarnation of evil and is ridiculed at the same time, even though he is completely convinced of climate change.

Swiss cows are the purest of innocent lambs anyway. Their population has *fallen from 900,000 to around 680,000 in the last eight decades*.¹⁴ Only the gods know why they of all people should have driven up temperatures. Of Switzerland’s agricultural land, 54 per cent is used as meadows and pastures in valleys and 94 per cent in mountain areas. For thousands of years, the Swiss and their livestock have turned this indigestible grass into high-quality, tasty food in the form of meat and dairy products.

Anyone who believes that the Swiss have been too stupid to do the right thing for thousands of years should in future feed on what wolves and bears leave behind after they have devoured the grazing livestock and driven out the grazers. Maybe then we will learn that we can’t fill our appetite with killer phrases.

Source: <https://schweizermonat.ch/nein-kuehe-sind-keine-klimakiller/>, 30 July 2024

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ https://www.nzz.ch/keine_experimente_mit_der_welt_ernaehrung-ld.703833

² <https://www.rnd.de/panorama/steuer-auf-treibhaus-gase-daenemarks-bauern-muessen-fuer-furzendes-vieh-zahlen-UVDBGDLAOJONFEMUB7QRYHT5XE.html>

³ <https://www.c40.org/about-c40/>

⁴ <https://expose-news.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Arup-C40-The-Future-of-Urban-Consumption-in-a-1-5C-World.pdf>

⁵ <https://openknowledge.fao.org/>

⁶ https://theshiftproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Lean-ICT-Report_The-Shift-Project_2019.pdf

⁷ <https://www.wochenblatt-dlv.de/regionen/oesterreich/treibhausgase-kuehe-wurden-schlecht-gerechnet-573248>

⁸ <https://acp.copernicus.org/articles/17/5751/2017/>

⁹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-022-27978-6>

¹⁰ <https://www.scinexx.de/news/geowissen/amazonas-baeume-als-methanschleudern/>

¹¹ <https://www.mpg.de/518642/pressemitteilung20060110>

¹² <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1600-0889.1986.tb00193.x>

¹³ <https://savory.global/holistic-management/>

¹⁴ <https://www.schweizerbauer.ch/tiere/milchvieh/tiefster-kuhbestand-seit-1896>