

The Magnitude of Human Agriculture

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Introduction

The advent of agriculture – the science of maintaining, rearing, and expanding the cultivation of crops and animals for food security – is defining feature of humanity and is often credited with being the principal development that enables sedentary human civilization. While the harvesting of wild (i.e. not cultivated) grains has been documented as far back as 100,000 years, the specified growth and harvesting of plants and animals dates back to $\approx 11,000$ BCE, with many of the staple animal protein sources (cattle, swine, and poultry) being domesticated within the past 10,000 years. It is not hyperbolic to state that the pursuit of food security is the primary driving force of human society.

With approximately $\approx 7 \cdot 10^9$ people on the planet today, each consuming ≈ 2000 kcal per day, our agricultural output must be on the order of $\sim 10^{14}$ consumable kJ per day. How have humans transformed the Earth to reliably meet this threshold? In this series of vignettes, we will explore the magnitude of human agriculture and its impact on the planet. Namely, we will consider three distinct “footprints” of agriculture.

Our first category, the physical footprint of agriculture, will consider the numbers and biomass of food sources on the planet under agricultural maintenance as well as the space on which they are grown and harvested. In doing so, we will rely on a series of data sets collected over the past ≈ 50 years from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Statistical Resources (FAOSTAT) as well as myriad industry data sets capturing the nutritional requirements of livestock and annual feed production. We will conclude our summary of the physical footprint by providing a handful of key numbers that put our production of food product in a relatable scale. These numbers will drive our pursuit of the next two footprints.

[Description of chemical and aqueous footprints to go here once I make more progress on the corresponding estimations.]

The Physical Footprint of Agriculture

We will begin our exploration of the three major impacts of human impacts by considering the key observable features, namely the total amount of biomass under human agriculture management and the space in which it all happens. This section will be broken into several parts. First, we will focus on “livestock by the numbers” and see if we can make sense of the recorded numbers of animals and their agricultural products

on a yearly basis. With a handle on the total number of livestock processed and/or reared per year, we will then turn our attention towards estimating the scale of crops needed to feed this livestock population in addition to the crops needed to satisfy the typical human diet. With a feeling in place for the numbers, we will turn our attention to the consideration of the spatial extent of farm land.

Livestock by the Numbers – Population

Any drive through the countryside, flight over the heartland of the central United States, or stroll through your local grocer will lead you to the same conclusion – a large amount of resources are dedicated to the rearing of animals as a protein source. In general, ≈ 30 of the typical American diet is derived from animal products (Eshel et al., 2014) with the remainder coming from various crops which we will consider in depth later in this vignette.

Since 1961, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has kept track of myriad data reflecting the extent, efficiency, and changes in global crop and livestock production. A key statistic tracked by the FAO is the global standing population of a wide variety of livestock. Collected at approximately the same time per year per reporting country, these data, portrayed graphically in Fig. ?? (A), reflects a snapshot of how many animals livestock are under human agricultural maintenance. Chicken, both egg-laying and meat-producing varieties, are far and away the most abundance type of livestock on the planet with ≈ 20 billion individuals under human care. Second to chicken are cattle, comprising approximately one tenth that of the chicken population at ≈ 2 billion individuals. Following cattle are swine at ≈ 1 billion individuals and then all other types of livestock (including horses, other poultry fowl, sheep, goats, and others) in total representing ≈ 6 billion individuals. Taking this data together, there are on the order of ≈ 30 billion animals under the umbrella of agriculture.

It is important to note, however, that this number does not reflect the magnitude of human animal usage and rather represents the instantaneous animal burden that humans must be able to support. Poultry chicken, for example, have a remarkably short lifespan of ≈ 6 weeks from hatching to slaughter. With such a rapid generation time (courtesy of decades of artificial selection for fast-growing variants), the entire standing population could be exchanged ≈ 8 times per year. Conversely, cattle have a typical lifespan of a few years from birth to slaughter, meaning that the observed standing population is larger than that actually processed and consumed each year.

While these numbers are striking, can we make sense of them? In the coming sections, we will perform a series of estimates to see if the observed order of magnitude of population jibes with simple expectations based on a typical human dietary breakdown. We will explore our estimates in more detail using additional data from the FAO which tracks the mass of animal product produced per year as well as the number of animals processed and/or slaughtered to produce said product.

Chicken

Cattle

Swine

The Magnitude of Annual Livestock Processing

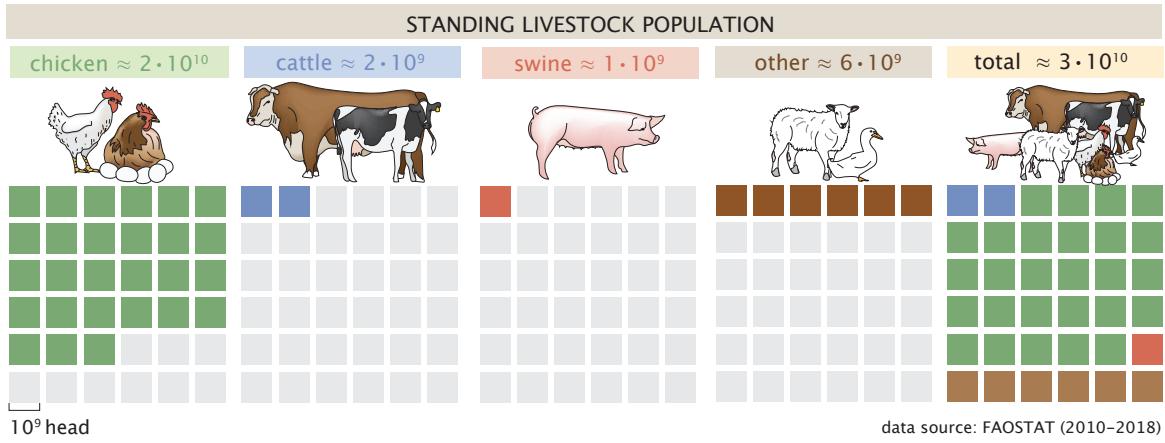


Fig. 1: The population and biomass distribution of livestock on Earth. The species breakdown of livestock is shown in terms of global population based on the average from years 2010 - 2018 present in the FAOSTAT livestock database. Category of “other” includes asses and mules, beehives, buffalo, camels and camelids, duck, geese and guinea fowl, goats, horses, pigeons and other small fowl, rabbits, rodents, sheep, and turkey. estimates listed in Table. A1.

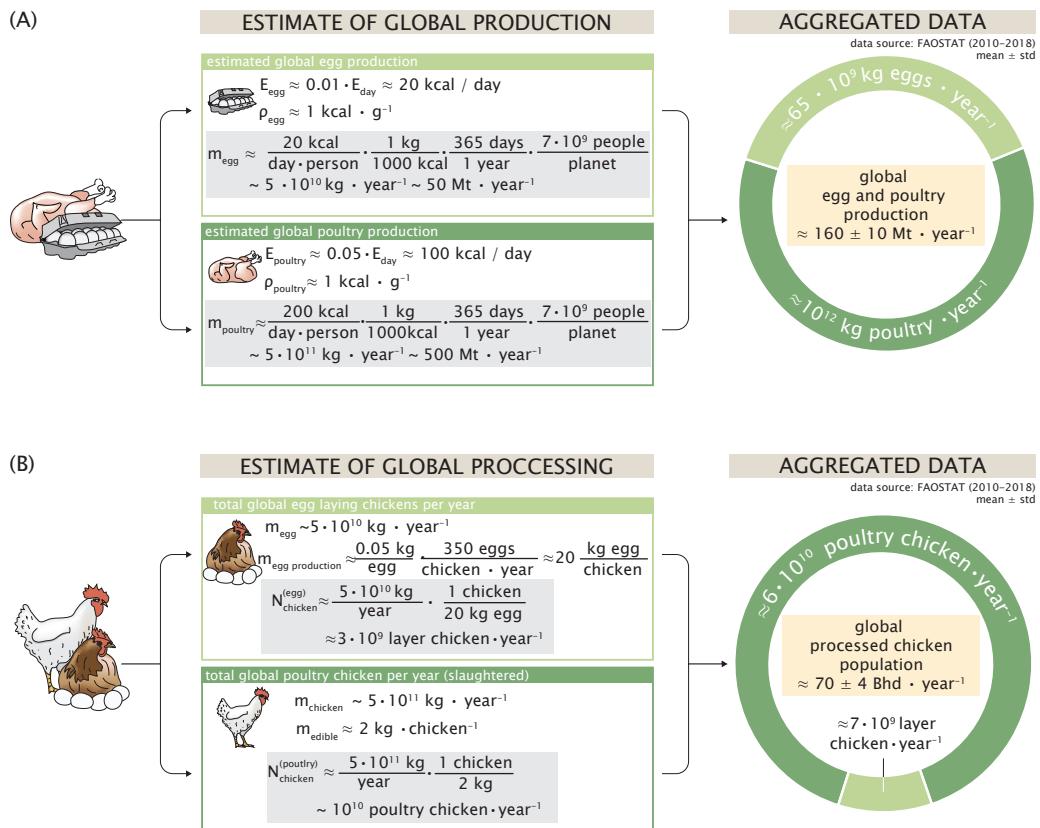


Fig. 2: Sizing up global mass of consumed chicken product and processed population. (A) Estimate for the amount of eggs (top panel) and poultry (bottom panel) consumed per year. The daily caloric intake of the average human is assumed to be $\approx 2000 \text{ kcal} \cdot \text{day}^{-1}$. (B) Estimate for the number of processed chickens per year to produce mass of egg and poultry from estimates in (A). Donut charts in right-hand side show the average distribution of chicken product (top) and processed chicken population (bottom) from the years 2010-2018 as recorded in the FAOSTAT data base. Reported values for total mass and processed population is reported as the mean and standard deviation of the 2010-2018 measurements.

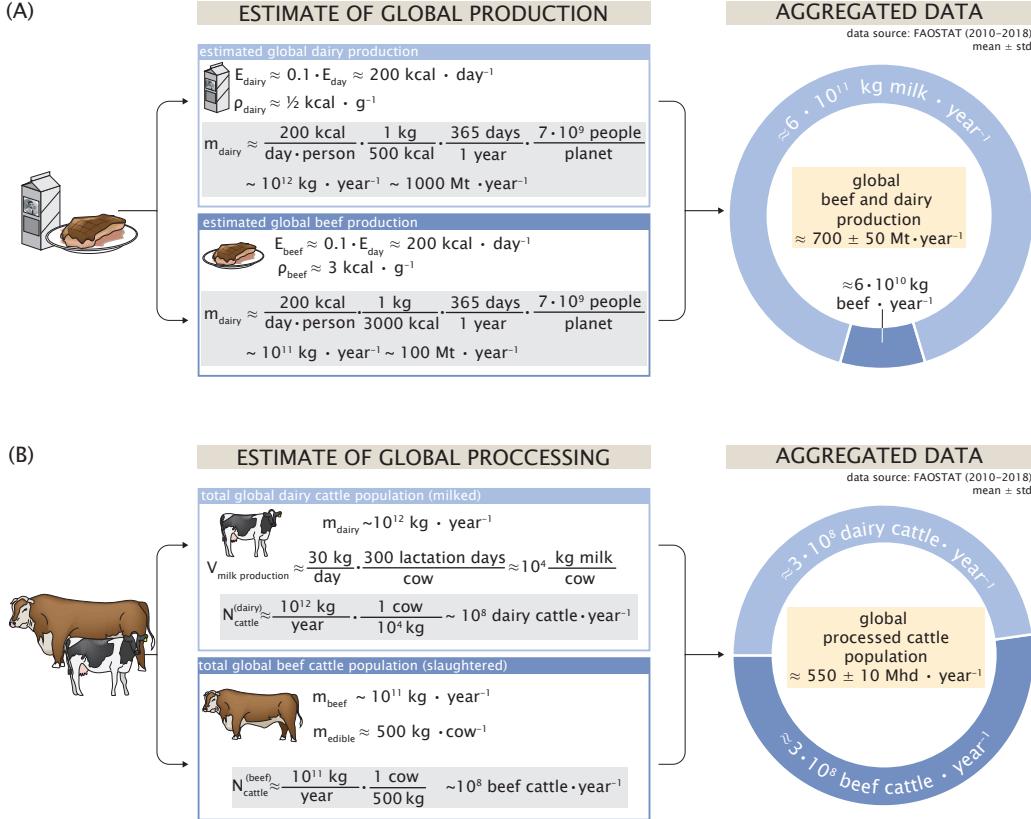


Fig. 3: Sizing up global mass of consumed cow product and processed population. (A) Estimate for the amount of milk (top panel) and beef (bottom panel) consumed per year. The daily caloric intake of the average human is assumed to be $\approx 2000 \text{ kcal} \cdot \text{day}^{-1}$. (B) Estimate for the number of processed cattle per year to produce mass of milk and dairy from estimates in (A). Donut charts in right-hand side show the average distribution of cattle product (top) and processed cattle population (bottom) from the years 2010–2018 as recorded in the FAOSTAT data base. Reported values for total mass and processed population is reported as the mean and standard deviation of the 2010–2018 measurements.

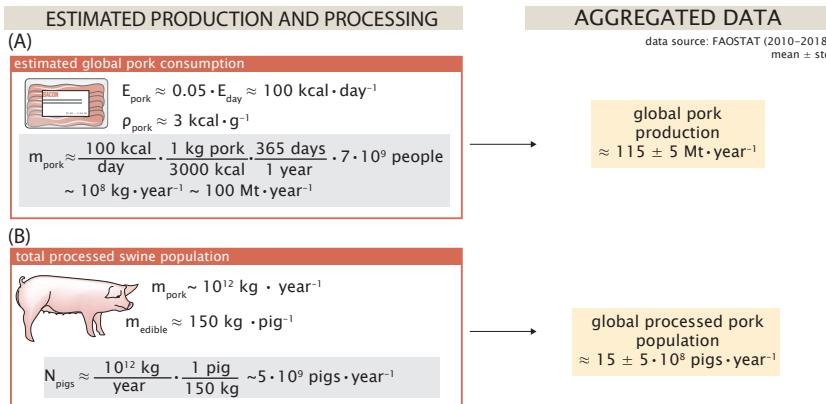


Fig. 4: Sizing up global mass of consumed pork product and processed population. (A) Estimate for the mass of pork product produced. The daily caloric intake of the average human is assumed to be $\approx 2000 \text{ kcal} \cdot \text{day}^{-1}$. (B) Estimate for the number pigs processed per year given pork product mass estimate given in (A). Text-boxes on right-hand side of (A) and (B) correspond to the mean and standard deviation of the reported measurements in the FAOSTAT data base for the years 2010–2018.

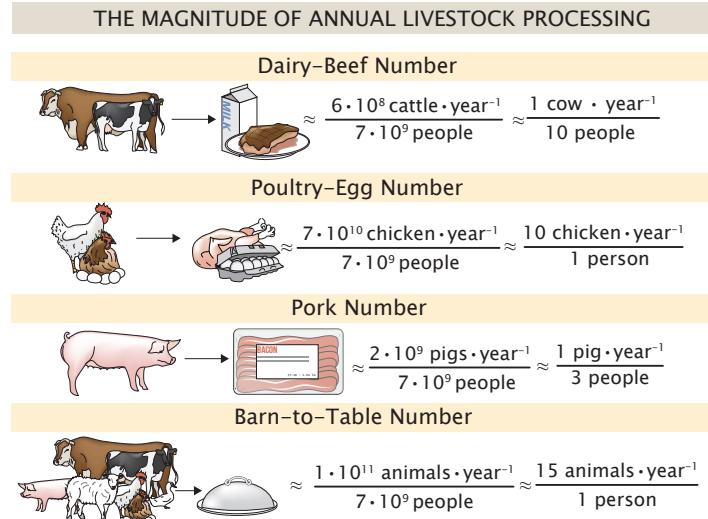


Fig. 5: Rules-of-thumb for the annual flux of processed animals per capita. Values provided in the number estimates correspond to the approximate averages of the reported producing population for each product from the FAOSTAT database for years 2010-2018. The “Farm-To-Table” number considers estimate of the number of animals processed for all meat, milk, and egg production across several animal categories as calculated by the FAO.

References

Eshel, G., Shepon, A., Makov, T., and Milo, R. (2014). Land, irrigation water, greenhouse gas, and reactive nitrogen burdens of meat, eggs, and dairy production in the United States. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, 11996–12001.