

Headline: Climate change, diet change

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World Environment Day (June 5) came and went with little fuss and frenzy hereabouts. People were monitoring two typhoons threatening to enter the Philippine Area of Responsibility, a term one now hears—all 12 syllables of it—in street corners, homes, and hovels, and one begins to wonder when Filipinos began to be so meteorologically inclined.

Thanks to broadcast media that now allot more air time on weather concerns, we've become amateur weather forecasters ourselves, spewing out meteorological jargon both in Filipino and English—habagat, intertropical convergence zone, manaka-nakang pag-ulan, pagkulong, at pagkidlat, etc. Television's weathermen became celebrities in their own right, starting with the late Amado Pineda of the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical, and Astronomical Services Administration and GMA 7, and later Nathaniel "Mang Tani" Cruz of the same network.

But we have yet to go beyond being weather watchers and storm chasers in this typhoon-battered archipelago. Bigger than the subject of weather (stormy, rainy, sunny, warm, etc.) is climate, which is "the average weather in a given area over a longer period of time." For the World Meteorological Organization, "the classical period used for describing a climate is 30 years."

The extreme and sudden weather changes now plaguing us have to do with climate change, the worrisome global phenomenon of our own making, unless you are a denialist who believe in an inexorable cosmic upheaval. Are we simply preparing for tomorrow's typhoon—with grab bag and all—but not for climate changes in the next decade? Is doing something to avert the doomsday scenarios beyond our capabilities?

Scientists of different persuasions have exposed the crimes committed in the name of progress against planet Earth and its atmosphere, as well as the personal sins of apathy, neglect, greed, and selfishness that have ruined the natural order of things and resulted in global warming and climate change. To each her/his own scientific expertise, but everything, when taken as a whole, can make the difference. We beat our breasts for being a throwaway society. We bring reusable bags and do small acts of love for Mother Nature.

But scientists, bless them, who now warn us about what we eat that cause harm to the environment, have yet to get our full attention. For how is our diet related to Earth's ruin? More bluntly, how does the food industry that brings food to our tables wreak havoc on our planet? There is a lot on the subject online. But a scientist among us, Dr. Teodoro C. Mendoza of the Institute of Crop Science of the College of Agriculture and Food Sciences of the University of the Philippines Los Baños, has written a paper for the International Journal of Agricultural Technology (2023). The title: "Transforming meat-based to plant-based diet is addressing food security and climate crisis in this millennium: A review" (<https://ijat-aatsea.com>).

It is a long, scientific read but the abstract can give you enough about where you are in the battle. Mendoza, a crop scientist, starts by saying that world leaders at the 2022 77th United Nations General Assembly considered climate change "as the most challenging concern of this century. It is the aim of this paper to present how 50 percent reduction in global greenhouse gas emission by 2030 and net zero emissions by 2050 can be achieved to avoid a 1.5 degree centigrade rise in global temperature and its twin effects of global food shortage and hunger." In other words, it can be done.

“Transforming meat-based to plant-centric diet by reducing meat intake is the way forward. Meat is a very ‘resource use intensive’ food. It takes 75 times more energy to produce meat than corn, four to five times more water than rice, about eight to ten times more land for one person to be nourished.” Mendoza calls for drastic change. “The 3.5 billion pastures and meadows that are used for grazing ruminant animals can be freed, and 56 percent of the 1.2 billion grains produced annually and fed to animals ... and 90 percent of all soybeans fed to animals can be used directly as human food. This implies that we do not need to increase food production by 60 percent or more when the population in 2050 reaches about 9.1 billion or more.

“Animals are the main cause of deforestation [which is] the main cause of biodiversity loss, soil erosion/land degradation, loss of watershed led to disrupted hydrologic cycle, diminishing the supply of fresh/clean water in rural areas ... Protein-based meat production is very inefficient, resource-use wise. Meat production requires lots of land, water, nutrients, and energy ... About 350 million tons of meat is consumed yearly, which requires slaughtering of 80 billion animals per year,” Mendoza says in his paper.

The greenhouse gas emission from these animals is staggering, a huge problem in itself. Think about it.

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