Who Is the Planetary Health Diet For?

21 August 2025
Explorations

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by André Krebber and Nina Mackert

Eat plenty of whole grains, fruits and veggies, dairy, legumes, and nuts—and avoid processed fats, added sugars, and red meat! This is the proposition, in a nutshell, of the **"Planetary Health Diet,"** which has entered popular media as a new diet for a new age. The **EAT-Lancet Commission** developed and proposed it in 2019, touting it as a path to a "Great Food Transformation."[1] As an interdisciplinary committee of scientists from 16 countries, the commission came together to establish global quantitative dietary targets that would help to ensure the achievement of the 17 UN Sustainability Goals and environmental-development aims of the Paris Agreement created in response to growing evidence "that food production is the largest cause of global environmental change."[2]

The urgency of such a transformation stems from the diagnosis of a dual, interrelated food crisis in the Anthropocene: While hundreds of millions of people worldwide suffer from malnutrition and nutrient deficiencies, the global food industry is causing environmental damage at an alarming rate, further jeopardizing the possibility of feeding a growing population. Food production is responsible for up to 30 percent of global greenhouse-gas emissions and 70 percent of freshwater consumption, not to speak of it polluting plants, animals, and the soil through the use of pesticides and other chemicals.[3]

To counteract this double crisis of human health and environmental damage, the Planetary Health Diet was proposed by the commission as a diet both healthy for humanity and sustainable for the planet if adapted on a global scale.[4] The commission's suggestions for what such a diet should entail are based on two sets of quantifications covering the production and consumption of food. First, the commission used the framework of planetary boundaries for developing thresholds for sustainable food

production.[5] For example, it proposed maximum levels of water or fertilizer use and greenhouse-gas emissions that food production should emit in order to be sustainable. Second, the commission quantified the amount of food an individual should eat per day for a healthy and sustainable diet: 2,500 calories, of which 232 grams should be whole grains, 300 grams vegetables, etc., sometimes allowing for larger ranges (between 0 and 500 grams of dairy per day and between 0 and 14 grams of beef, lamb, or pork is recommended).

The goal to stop the food industry from destroying the planet is laudable and necessary, of course. However, the proposed Planetary Health Diet might miss the mark. **It risks undermining the inclusivity of the planetary perspective by reinforcing a limited biopolitical and a (neo)colonial perspective on human health and planetary resources.**

First of all, although this "universal reference diet" suggested by the EAT-Lancet commission is intended to be adjustable to "all food cultures and production systems in the world," it homogenizes and reduces the diversity of human relationships with food.[6] Converting a complex, qualitative problem into numbers of calories and proteins reduces food and health to something "amenable to economic analysis and technological solutions."[7] It allows only those aspects to become evident that can be measured and, allegedly, managed, thereby reducing the diversity of possible human relationships to the planet. In the Planetary Health Diet, neither taste, tradition, justice nor interspecies relations are considered important, for instance, while quantified understandings of nutrition and health are foregrounded.

Moreover, calorie counts are historically tied to very particular biopolitical, colonial, and eugenic projects of modernity. Emerging in late nineteenth-century Western industrial societies, they reflect a capitalist model of productivity and input–output processes. Together with protein, calorie counts were instrumental in manifold efforts of governing the bodies and health of populations, which were oftentimes conceived in racist categories. There is a **rich history**, for instance, of efforts to set global dietary standards, where the concept of calorie consumption as expressive of productivity was used to **assign lower food rations to colonial populations**.

Additionally, the quantitative targets of the Planetary Health Diet and their totalizing claim obscure the reality that responsibility for environmental degradation is not shared equally and that not everyone has the same opportunities to implement the proposed

recommendations. Exposing the limits of the Planetary Health Diet, scholars have calculated that its adoption is "unaffordable to at least 1.58 billion people and . . . more expensive than a nutritionally adequate diet."[8]

Likewise, the commission's focus on the Western world is clearly reflected in its recommendation of a "Mediterranean diet." Although the commission claims it is not promoting universal adoption of a specific diet and acknowledges "[m]any other traditional diets, such as those in Indonesia, Mexico, India, China, and West Africa," its presentation of the Mediterranean diet as the "best studied example" and a "well-established" model nonetheless reflects a distinctly Eurocentric perspective.[9] This Western frame of reference is also indicated by the fact that the majority of the studies on which the commission based its dietary recommendations were conducted in Europe and the United States.[10]

Finally, the Planetary Health Diet narrows the planetary to a material-support infrastructure for humans. "Civilisation is in crisis," Lancet authors Tamara Lucas and Richard Horton wrote in their editorial appraisal of the commission's work, seeking to "[restore] the natural balance of the planet's resources."[11] Instead of challenging its anthropocentrism and breaking with ideals of limitless growth and human mastery over nature, calculating ideal diets and quantifying acceptable biodiversity loss "nourishes the Promethean desire to push back these limits rather than forcing us to see them as an opportunity to build a different relationship with the living world."[12]

The perspective taken by the commission, while acknowledging that human health and the health of the planetary ecosystem are inseparable, is far short of the propositions that a diverse coalition of activists and scholars have been making since the 1970s. For example, the environmental group Friends of the Earth famously defined health in 1980 as "a state of complete physical, mental, social and ecological well-being," concluding "that personal health involves planetary health," while the physician Per Fugelli outrightly anthropomorphized the planet when he declared: "The patient Earth is sick."[13] Thus, a chemically polluted river is equally as sick as the humans and other animals that it makes sick. Here, the "planetary" proves a hopeful category and perspective because it promises to move beyond an anthropocentric, functionalist framework of health. Precisely by calling it planetary, planetary health has the potential to evoke the deep interconnections and interdependencies between human culture, the Earth's physical systems, and its diverse communities of organic and inorganic life and matter.

The meaning of planetary in the Planetary Health Diet, however, leads these references to the planet as a category of its own right back into a totalizing human order of planetary resources. The commission's narrowing of the planetary to a material-support infrastructure for humans counters precisely what the adoption of the planetary signals: the recognition of the planetary as more than a functionalistic system and something that exists beyond, and to some degree independent of, the human, **as multispecies perspectives highlight**.

Against the broader history of planetary-health concerns, the commission contradicts the very trajectory and history that led to its own adoption and consideration of the term in the first place. The planetary will become productive in responding to our crisis, we contend, *only* if we remember its resistance to culture's anthropocentric, technocratic, and colonial legacies.

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Planetary health has so far been predominantly studied by natural scientists and medical experts. Over the next few months we will publish a series of essays that illuminate different aspects of the planetary-health concept from a decidedly environmental-humanities perspective. The entries have their origin in the contributions of international scholars who attended the Rachel Carson Center workshop "Imagining Planetary Health, Well-Being, and Habitability," convened by Lijuan Klassen and Christof Mauch and sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation.

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