

# Mee(a)ting Issues with the British Ecological Society – Why I boycotted the 2015 Annual Meeting

Simon Leather / Harper Adams University  
@Entoprof

Normally at this time of year I would be recovering from the enjoyable after-effects of the British Ecological Society (BES) annual meeting; too much talking, too much eating, too much coffee, too much beer and wine and not enough sleep.

This year however, I denied myself the traditional end to the academic year as I decided to boycott the meeting. As someone who has, since 1977, missed only a handful of meetings, this was big personal sacrifice, but I felt very strongly that I needed to make a protest: hence the one person boycott! So what prompted this action?

I was fully intending on attending the meeting in Edinburgh. Having spent ten years living in Peebles and working at the Forest Research Station at Roslin, Edinburgh is full of pleasant memories for me. I logged on to the site to register for the meeting and was stunned and annoyed to come across this statement:

*Food Policy In an effort to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the BES has decided to remove all farmed ruminant meat from its catering. Ruminants and their farming are key producers of methane. We run several large events a year, serving thousands of meals to participants and are keenly aware of the impact of human activity on natural systems. We will continue to cater for non-vegetarians, but will remove farmed ruminant meat from menus and will also only serve MSC certified fish. We take seriously our commitment to greening our events and hope you understand and support our decision. For more information on the background to this decision, read the paper by Ripple, W.J. et al: Ruminants, climate change and climate policy. - See more at: [http://www.britishecologicalsociety.org/events/current\\_future\\_meetings/2016-annual-symposium/registration/#sthash.WioDx4IA.dpuf](http://www.britishecologicalsociety.org/events/current_future_meetings/2016-annual-symposium/registration/#sthash.WioDx4IA.dpuf)*

Two things about this statement really got my goat (ruminant pun intended) – first, the non-democratic nature of this decision, the membership were never polled about this and second, the patronising and insulting statement, “We will continue to cater for non-vegetarians” This is tantamount to the comments by the vegan Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Kerry McArthy who suggested that meat eaters should be treated like smokers. As ecologists, and presumably all scientists with some biological background, the people running the BES know that we are omnivores by nature, look at our dentition and gut structure folks!

I would also point out that the UK dairy herd is bigger (1.9 million) than the beef herd (1.5 million) and that you can't have one without the other. The UK is the world's tenth largest producer of milk (2.2%). So why not ban all dairy products and make delegates drink their tea and coffee black or with a vegetable based milk substitute? What about ruminant derived products? Whilst we are about it, how about penalizing delegates wearing woolly jumpers, leather shoes, leather belts and carrying their cash in leather wallets, purses and handbags?

I raised my concerns via Twitter and Facebook and did have a minor discussion with Andrew Beckerman, the outgoing Meetings Secretary, but to no real satisfaction. I pointed out that why should people who enjoy beef and lamb be singled out, when

those BES members who fly and drive everywhere not be targeted? I made the decision many years ago that I would not fly if at all possible, basically unless work dictated it, and as a result have flown (including return flights) only six times in the last twenty years. I recycle obsessively and my foreign travel is by train, ferry or Skype! So yes, tropical field work and international conferences on the other side of the world are a thing of the past, but I see no need for flying visits by western ecologists to indulge in brief exotic field work. Either go for the duration of the study or stay at home and discover the wonders of your own back yard, or rather than be an ecological imperialist, trust the local scientists to collect the data for you to number crunch. Or if you feel that your presence is indispensable then go by ship and take the opportunity to write and read papers on the way ☺

Although Ripple et al (2014) make a convincing case for slowing down greenhouse gas emissions by reducing ruminant production they do so from the highly biased minority viewpoint of those with “ecological privilege” (Nevins, 2014). They thus singularly fail to address the equally effective and more attainable actions that can be made by targeting travel, especially by air and private motoring (Girod et al., 2012). There are over 100,000 flights a day and air travel is set to double by the year 2050 despite the fact that fossil fuels (oil at any rate) will run out in about 40-50 years (the former estimate according to the Institute of

Mechanical Engineers, the latter by BP). One might ask then why do we have politicians wanting to build more airports and runways? As an ecologist this does not compute, but then looking at how many of my colleagues boast about their cheap flights compared with my more expensive rail trips, perhaps it does. As Nevins (2014) points out, a privileged few enjoy the ability to travel quickly and comfortably (although I would dispute the comfortably) around the world to conferences and field sites and this has a very significant effect on carbon emissions. Nevins calculated the carbon emissions generated by the Association of American Geographers to attend their 2011 meeting in Seattle as 5,352 metric tons, pointing out that the annual total per capita carbon emissions from energy consumption in Haiti is 210 kg and for Bangladesh 290 Kg, i.e. the air travel alone to and from the Seattle conference per delegate was more about three times the total annual emissions of an average Haitian or Bangladeshi which by any standard is unbalanced and profligate. Whilst other travel forms are amenable to very large future reductions in carbon emissions by improvements in technology, the evidence is that air travel will prove intractable and that the only feasible way forward is to drastically reduce flights made (Girod et al., 2012, 2013). Given that only 2-3% of the world's population flies internationally

(Peeters et al., 2006), this would seem a realistic aim and cause less harm to livelihoods and ways of life of people in less developed nations (note that 31 % of the global cattle herd are found in India, compared with 0.35% in the UK – Table 1). Unfortunately, although many of this wealthy airborne 2-3% are keen to embrace 'light green habits' such as home recycling and composting, they are the most likely to indulge in long distance flights and not want to be denied the 'privilege' of flying (Barr et al., 2010).

I don't think that it is in the BES's remit to impose life style choices on its membership by banning particular food groups. If the BES directorate want to make an environmental point using food as an example, then perhaps they should concentrate on food miles instead and serve locally sourced meat and seasonal vegetables. Delegates at the Edinburgh meeting could then have enjoyed the excellent Scottish beef that is available served with 'tatties and neeps' and perhaps also have experienced that particularly Scottish delicacy, the Scotch pie ☺



I do hope that the BES will reconsider their food policy as I would hate to have to miss any of the many excellent meetings scheduled for 2016.

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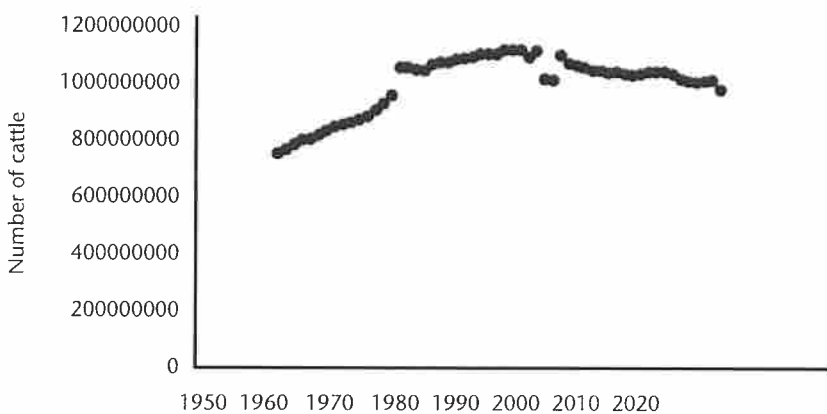
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TABLE 1. NUMBER OF CATTLE IN THE WORLD.

World: 964,640,000

Rank	Country	Head	% of Total
1	India	301,100,000	31.21%
2	Brazil	213,035,000	22.08%
3	China	100,550,000	10.42%
4	United States	89,800,000	9.31%
5	European Union	88,150,000	9.14%
6	Argentina	51,895,000	5.38%
7	Australia	27,600,000	2.86%
8	Russia	19,132,000	1.98%
9	Mexico	17,120,000	1.77%
10	Uruguay	12,108,000	1.26%
11	Canada	11,915,000	1.24%
12	New Zealand	9,938,000	1.03%
13	Egypt	6,485,000	0.67%
14	Ukraine	4,408,000	0.46%
15	Belarus	4,364,000	0.45%
16	Japan	3,850,000	0.40%
17	United Kingdom	3,400,000	0.35%

SOME MEATY FACTS FOR THE BRITISH ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY TO RUMINATE UPON.



The global cattle herd peaked in 1990 and has been declining, albeit gradually, ever since.

There are approximately 1 billion sheep in the world, of which 187,000,000 (18%) are in China; in the UK there are 22,900,000. There are 674,000,000 goats in the world, most of which are in the tropics.