



An excerpt from a conversation on food with UCSB professor, human ecologist and author David Cleveland

He grew up on his grandfather’s farm in upstate New York, where there was no question how food ended up on the plate. Four decades later, Dr. David Cleveland still maintains his close connection to small-scale farming communities.

He has traveled the world doing research on sustainable agri-food systems created by indigenous peoples in northeast Ghana, Oaxaca, Mexico, and the Zuni and Hopi of the American Southwest. A professor in UC Santa Barbara’s Environmental Studies program, Cleveland wrote *Balancing on a Planet: The Future of Food and Agriculture* (2014) and was honored with the first-ever UCSB Sustainability Champion grant in 2009. He is currently working on his next book *Food Gardens for a Changing World* with his colleague Daniela Soleri, a research scientist in UCSB’s Geography Department.



Coastlines: You gave a talk recently on the relationship between the climate and food systems. Why do you think this is such an important topic?

David Cleveland: The effect of our food system on climate change is something that is often overlooked. We focus on how climate is going to affect our food supply, but it’s a circular thing because our food supply has a huge effect on climate. Most of what people tend to focus on, because it’s so well-documented and publicized, is transportation and energy. People talk about fossil fuels and cars, which are important, but by thinking of it in those buckets, we forget how much the food system is responsible for—at least one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions. There’s two things that are really good about that – first, because the food system has such a big impact, it also offers a huge opportunity to reduce greenhouse emissions, and second, it doesn’t require a lot of new infrastructure, technology or research. It does require a change in diet, and that can be pretty difficult.

This might require more of an education, though.

I do think it would require more education. Research is showing that most people are not aware of the effect of their food choices on the climate. But there's also huge extra benefits because our diet is making us sick right now. And the foods that are climatefriendly are also good for our health and our communities.

For us there might be some struggles culturally or geographically to give up, say, fish...

But that's the key, I think, is not presenting these choices as black and white. There are some who say "well if you're a real environmentalist, then you have to be vegan." But that just turns people off. That's a turn off.

Then what can people do to begin making better choices?

By asking simple questions. Imagining, while they look at food -- how did that get there? How did that frozen broccoli get to be in that freezer in that grocery? Where did it come from? What helped it to get there and how did it get there?

Once people begin to interrogate their food, that will lead to a whole bunch of other things. Not only where it came from, but where is it going to go into your body, and what's it going to do to your body once you eat it.

We've been discouraged, discouraged, discouraged -- from thinking about the social and environmental impacts of how the food gets to us, and of the health impacts to us, once we eat it. The thing is to keep asking those questions and to make small changes. Not to think "Oh I have to totally change my diet!"

A new classes I started to teach two years ago is called Diet and Global Climate Change. Students really love it. Climate change is in the air -- everyone is talking about it, it's in the news all the time, it's in our discussions -- and young people are worried. It's their future being threatened by our lifestyle and by an economic system that doesn't want to change. This class shows them a big connection between what they do everyday, which is choose food and eat it, and climate change. It gives them a sense of power. That "Yeah, I can do something -- I can do something directly, I can talk to my friends about it." It gives them a hook into the problem and empowers them to change their diets and to advocate for change in society.

What are we striving for?

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What really fulfills us is love and being with people who we like -- and helping them and feeling that sense of social connectedness. That's what makes us happy. That's what food can do.

I ask my class, "What is food for?" And my students say "Well, food is for keeping people alive." So I ask, "Why are we alive?"

Am I alive to make money? I want to be happy. That's what the Buddhists say -- everyone wants to be happy, everyone suffers...so we should help each other be happier and to suffer less. And that just seems such a simple formula for making the world a better place to live. And food is a huge part of that.

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