

The Sacred Cow project is soon to release a book and a movie, making the case for an ethical, regenerative food system built around well-raised cattle.

Sacred Cow: It’s the How



The last few years have been rough for beef. Explosive growth in meat-alternative foods have made it easy to fill a dinner plate with plant-based versions of anything from spaghetti bolognese to steak pie. Barclays has predicted the global market for alternative meat could reach around \$140 billion in the next ten years, a growth of 1000%. In the US alone, according to UBS, the plant-based-protein or alternative-meat market could reach \$85 billion dollars by 2030.

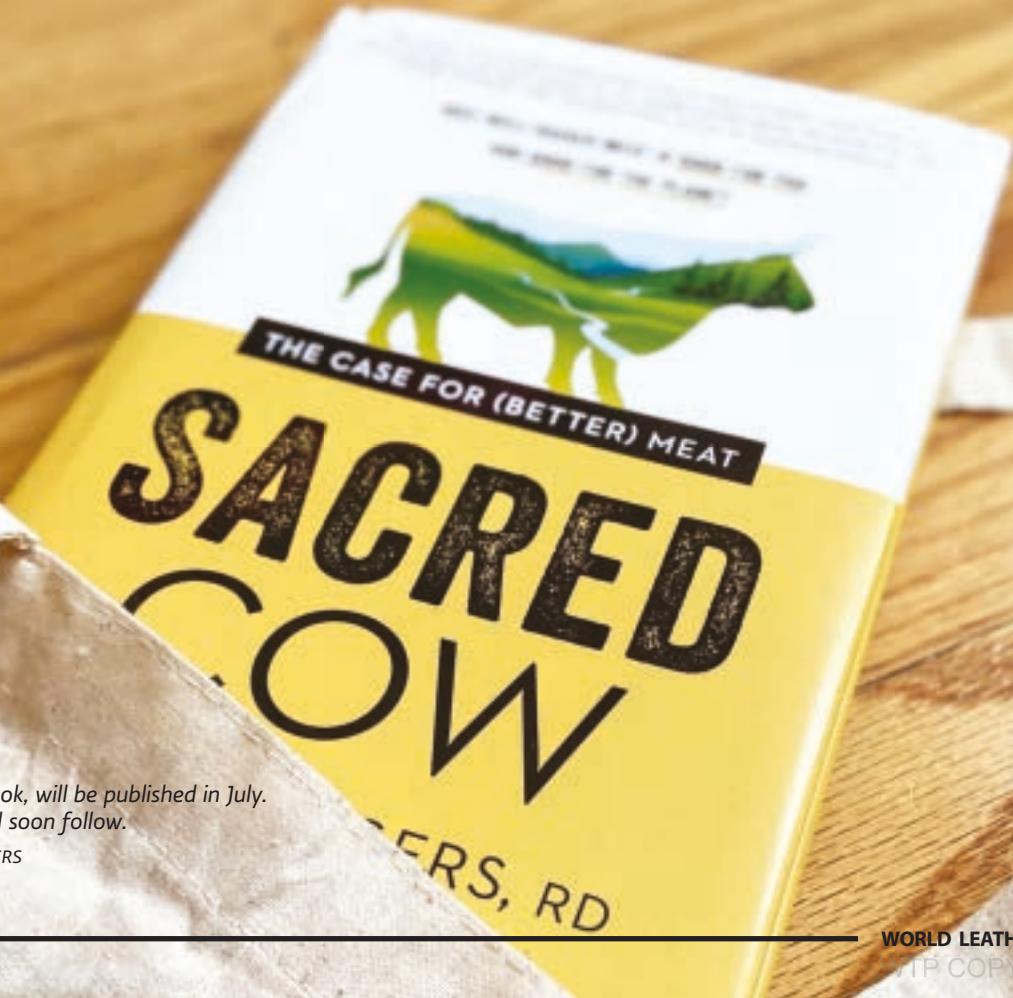
The company Beyond Meat — which makes the pea-protein Beyond Burger — is a great illustration of the enthusiasm behind this market. The company went

public last May at \$46 a share and by July it had passed \$200 a share. Major food manufacturers are getting in the mix too. Even Brazil-based JBS, generally considered the world's largest processor of beef, has released a plant-based burger under one of its brands.

At the same time, a growing number of media makers and celebrities have joined the anti-meat chorus. In its first week of release, the 2019 pro-vegan documentary, *The Game Changers*, was said to be iTunes’ best-selling documentary of all time. It now joins a host of other mainstream vegan-friendly documentaries on Netflix and other platforms, all touting the message that a diet and lifestyle devoid



Sacred Cow’s Diana Rodgers co-authored the book and directed the documentary film. CREDIT: DIANA RODGERS



Sacred Cow, the book, will be published in July. The film version will soon follow.

CREDIT: DIANA RODGERS

of animal products is healthier, more ethical and better for the environment.

But there is a counter message, and it is about to be amplified via bookstores and cinemas this summer.

Sacred Cow: The Case for (Better) Meat, the book by Diana Rodgers and Robb Wolf, will be released on July 14. The documentary film by the same name will come soon after. (The film's release date is expected to be the first week of August, but, as with just about everything in the world right now, the pandemic keeps timings a little unpredictable.)

The premise of both is that beef and cattle rearing have unfairly become viewed as unhealthy and bad for the environment when, in reality, plant-based agriculture (and diet) is very problematic too. They analyse the complex dynamics at play in humans' decisions about what to eat and take on today's vilification of cattle farming and eating beef.

Explicitly addressing key anti-beef talking points, the book seeks to answer questions about whether vegetarians live longer than meat eaters, links between eating meat and cancer, the effects of cattle methane emissions, and whether humans can get adequate nutrients from a plant-based diet.

They also address the role of the cow in so many aspects of life, generating by-products that range from medicines and laboratory research materials, to insulation, plaster and to leather of course.

But the book and the film are cornerstones of a grander initiative: the Sacred Cow Project, named for the idiomatic use of 'sacred cow', meaning an idea considered to be above criticism.

The message comes from an eclectic group. In addition to co-authoring the book, Ms Rodgers is the director (and a producer) of the documentary film, a registered dietician and a writer, and she hosts the Sustainable Dish podcast. Mr Wolf, a former biochemist, is the film's executive producer and previously authored the book *The Paleo Solution*. Another vocal contributor is Lauren Stine, an attorney and professor of agriculture law, who has written extensively on Sacred Cow's behalf; several of her pieces are discussed in this article. Other key names involved in the project include James Connolly, Abby Fuller, Callie Taintor Wiser, Jon Neuburger, James Cooper and Meg Chatham.

Sacred Cow is a platform from which its people use articles, podcasts, blogs, social media, their respective businesses — and soon the book and movie — to further their arguments and to battle what they feel are widespread fallacies surrounding the food system prevalent in western cultures.

It was never the plan for the Sacred Cow book and film to be released during a pandemic, but the timing is in some ways fortuitous.

"Nowadays, few of us rarely think past the shelves of our grocery stores to the actual food producers," Ms Rodgers tells *World Leather*. "The pandemic has exposed the importance of a regional, local food system."

Much of Sacred Cow's argument boils down to three sentiments: "It's not the cow, it's the how", people need animal foods to thrive, and well-raised cattle are critical for a regenerative food system.

Information wars

A key tenet of the Sacred Cow project is that beef has become a scapegoat for health crises in the west and climate change. The organisation feels that people have "allowed corporate interests, big food, flawed science, click-bait media and naive celebrities to steer the public away



Non-profit organisation Savory Institute, a long-time proponent of encouraging farmers to manage cattle in a way that "mimics the natural movement of herd animals", presents these 'before and after' images of a livestock farm in Australia in 1992 and, after several years of regenerative grazing, in 1999.

CREDIT: SAVORY INSTITUTE

from a truly nutrient-dense, ethical, sustainable and regenerative food system".

Take, for example, a segment titled 'Leading Cause of Death' on the website for the Game Changers (GC) film. Like Sacred Cow, the website for the Game Changers film has a densely populated website featuring articles, resources, recipes and more surrounding its vegan-friendly platform. 'Leading cause of death' cites a 2018 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* that said the number one cause of premature death and disability in the United States is the 'standard American diet'. Game Changers goes on to define this diet as having "high intakes of meat, dairy products, eggs, fried foods, refined grains, and refined sugars, with low intakes of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds".

This is the type of information Sacred Cow aims to bring clarity to. Ms Rodgers and Mr Wolf discuss at length in their book why connections between diet and health are often ambiguous, conflating correlation with causation. Nutritional studies are hard, they say, due to the breadth and complexity of contributing factors. For example, is a beefeater eating a hotdog on a white bun with a soda, fries and mayonnaise-rich potato salad, or a grilled steak served over a bed of leafy lettuces and colourful chopped up veg washed down with a glass of sparkling water? And what happens when you factor in individuals' genetics? They also point out how it is not unusual for a subsequent article in the same respected publication to call into question previous findings — for example, "Backlash over Meat Dietary Recommendations Raises Questions About Corporate Ties to Nutrition Scientists" was also published in *JAMA*.



Arguments over environmental impacts are just as contentious. The Sacred Cow article 'Infographics Scapegoating Beef Usually Miss the Big Picture', for example, describes a chart published by Our World in Data (OWID) as "reductive and misleading". The OWID chart shows greenhouse emissions across the supply chain, with nuts at the bottom (contributing the lowest amount), fish and rice around the middle, and herd beef at the top.

In author Lauren Stine's rebuttal, she quotes Frank Mitloehner, a professor with the University of California, who said the graph's findings were flawed and fail to recognise that some climate pollutants (such as CO₂ and nitrous oxide) are more long-lasting, while methane emitted by animals like cattle and sheep is a short-lived pollutant. That is, the greenhouse gases associated with the production of a kilogram of peas will affect the planet for longer than those of a cow.

Sacred Cow also points to the White Oak Pastures farm in Bluffton, Georgia, as an example of how regenerative land and cattle management can be good for the environment. Operating a vertically-integrated model, the farm actually sequesters more carbon in its soil than its pasture-raised cows emit during their lifetimes. According to a chart in Sacred Cow the book, this means a person could offset the carbon emissions of eating one plant-based burger (+3.5 net total emissions per pound of product) by eating one White Oak Pastures grass-fed beef burger (-3.5).

Or consider the issue of water usage. Ms Rodgers has taken on the oft-repeated argument that meat requires more water than plant products, explaining the distinction between green water and blue water. Green water comes from natural rainfall, she says, while blue has been sourced from surface or groundwater resources. She points to studies that have found typical beef requires approximately 410 gallons of water per pound to produce, which she says is approximately the same as for the production of rice, avocados, walnuts and sugar. Further, Ms Rodgers cites Nicolette Hahn Niman's book, *Defending Beef*, to say the amount of water for grass-fed beef is even lower, requiring around 100 gallons of water per pound.

It's the how

Because "well-managed" or "well-raised" cattle are fundamental to the Sacred Cow's vision of a regenerative food system, it is important to understand how the group defines "well".

Well-managed cattle refer to those cattle whose ranchers move them frequently to new pastures. Also called rotational grazing, mob grazing, cell grazing, intensive management, adaptive multi-paddock management and holistic management or holistic-planned grazing, this frequent movement is said to be healthier for the animals and the land.

By "typical beef", Ms Rodgers and Mr Wolf mean beef from feedlot-finished or industrial cattle that typically graze for the first half or so of their lives, and spend the latter half on a feedlot to increase their weight. Grass-fed or grass-finished beef cattle, they write, are those that have grazed on pasture their entire lives.

Ms Stine's article, 'What Really Well-Managed Livestock Means', delves deeper into why livestock play a role in regenerative agriculture and outlines why managed grazing is more beneficial to the environment than continuous grazing.

When given access to an entire pasture, Ms Stine writes, "livestock will preferentially graze their favourite forages while leaving less tasty ones ungrazed." Because a pasture

contains many different species of plants, this results in overgrazing some and avoiding others entirely.

Conversely, she writes, in subdivided pastures where livestock can only access a given paddock, grazing efficiency is said to be as high as 75% (the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture found it to be as low as 30% with continuous grazing), and cattle is said to typically take only the top half of existing forage in a paddock. When the cows move onto another paddock, those remaining leaf surfaces expedite photosynthesis, which results in a healthier root system more capable of capturing carbon.

Plants in a pandemic

Disruptions to supply chains due to the covid-19 crisis shed some unexpected light on issues held dear by Sacred Cow, such as production methods or consumer behaviour.

In the article 'Coronavirus has exposed the weakness of ultra-processed, plant-based foods', Ms Stine says the pandemic showed a lack of resilience in highly processed food products, because they are dependent on complex supply chains and factories. She cites data from research firm 210 Analytics that found retail meat sales rose 77% when the Americans started panic buying in March, and fresh beef sales alone rose 9.8%.

"By and large," Ms Stine writes, "when parents are faced with the prospect of being unable to shop for groceries they don't choose plant-based burgers that cost twice as much as grass-fed beef, they choose animal proteins."

She also points out that some of the empty shelves appearing on news reports were the product of plant-based protein companies reliant on industrialised food chains. "Plant-based protein companies rely on monocultures of peas and soybeans shipped long distances to factories where the ingredients are processed into different products, packaged, and shipped across the United States," she writes. In addition to potential virus exposure due to multiple hands involved, the supply chain is "only as strong as its weakest link".

With minimal inputs to produce enormous amounts of processed food, she says, plus closures and fewer employees at critical points in the chain, "getting monoculture-derived food from the field to consumers' tables becomes nearly impossible".

The coronavirus pandemic has also unwittingly helped to defend Sacred Cow's argument that cows are unfairly maligned for their methane output.

Plant-based food companies say cows are a leading cause of climate change, Ms Stine writes; however, as locked-down people have relied less on cars and planes to travel, air pollution has fallen — and yet, "the US is still home to the same number of cows".

Conventional beef products still stand to improve their carbon footprint, she admits, but "maps showing the significant decline in pollution [during the pandemic] make a compelling case for how badly cows have been scapegoated for climate change".

Ultimately, the pandemic has caused consumers to look more closely at many of the issues Sacred Cow seeks to illuminate, and may prove to be an appropriate time for the launch of the book and the film.

"This has highlighted the resiliency in smaller scale, local foodsheds," says Ms Rodgers, "where we are more intimately connected with how our food is raised and the people and practices involved in bringing that food to our families and plates." 🐮