



WWF POSITION STATEMENT

WWF POSITION ON HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE DIETS

This position statement has three objectives:

- 1) *Internal alignment*: to harmonize WWF's understanding of what constitutes healthy and sustainable diets;
- 2) *External relevance*: To advance WWF's voice publicly on this topic and underpin a globally strategic role in elevating the issue of healthy and sustainable diets;
- 3) *Accelerate action and collaboration*: To foster greater internal and external collaboration to accelerate the global transition to healthy and sustainable diets.

The opportunity

The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the urgent need to build food systems that nurtures both healthy people and a healthy planet. This is supported by a growing body of evidence pointing to the sweeping benefits of shifting diets. This research has shown that a global shift toward healthier, more sustainable diets will combat climate change and food insecurity^{1,2}, improve human health^{3,4}, make supply chains more resilient to shocks⁵, decrease the risks of future pandemics^{6,7} and could unleash USD 4.5 trillion in new business opportunities each year, at the same time as saving damages of USD 5.7 trillion to people and the planet each year⁸. When shifting diets is combined with improved food production practices and reduced food loss and waste, we can both feed humanity and reduce environmental impacts.⁹ Emerging technologies such as meat alternatives, digital agriculture, and traceability of foods could amplify and accelerate the positive impacts of dietary shifts.

The challenges

Currently, global food production and consumption are the single largest human pressure on nature.¹⁰ Agriculture already occupies about 50% of the Earth's habitable land¹¹ and is the principal driver of biodiversity loss.¹² In addition to biodiversity loss from habitat destruction, wildlife (including fish) is consumed by more than half of the world's population, and of the many threats posed to biodiversity, overexploitation of wildlife is one of the most damaging.¹³ Food production also contributes to roughly 25% of total global greenhouse gas emissions and this share is expected to double in the coming years.¹⁴ The food system is also the largest consumer and polluter of the world's water resources, damaging lakes, rivers, and oceans.¹⁵ Moreover, only 66% of marine fish stocks were within biologically sustainable levels in 2017 (a decrease from 90% in 1990)¹⁶ while freshwater fisheries, which provide critical protein for hundreds of millions of vulnerable people, are under increasing threat from overfishing, pollution and unsustainable development. The expanding aquaculture sector is associated with negative impacts on coastal and inland freshwater habitats, including conversion of

¹ IPCC. (2019). Climate Change and Land: an IPCC Special Report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems.

² Loken et al. (2020). Diets for a Better Future: Rebooting and Reimagining Food Systems in the G20. EAT.

³ Global Nutrition Report (2020). Action on equity to end malnutrition. Bristol, UK: Development Initiatives.

⁴ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. (2020). *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets*. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca9692en>

⁵ FAO (2020). COVID-19 and the risk to food supply chains: How to respond? Rome.

⁶ WWF (2020). Covid 19: Urgent Call to Protect People and Nature. WWF.

⁷ UNEP and ILRI (2020). Preventing the Next Pandemic: Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission. Nairobi, Kenya.

⁸ FOLU (2019). Growing Better: Ten Critical Transitions to Transform Food and Land Use. Food and Land Use Coalition.

⁹ Willett W, Rockström J, Loken B, et al. (2019). Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT *Lancet* Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. *Lancet* 393: 447–92.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ellis EC, Klein Goldewijk K, Siebert S, et al. (2010). Anthropogenic transformation of the biomes, 1700 to 2000. *Global Ecology and Biogeography* 19(5): 589–606.

¹² Tilman D, Clark M, Williams DR, et al. (2017). Future threats to biodiversity and pathways to their prevention. *Nature* 546: 73–81.

¹³ Maxwell S, Fuller R, Brooks T, & Watson J. (2016). Biodiversity: The ravages of guns, nets and bulldozers. *Nature*. 536: 143–145.

¹⁴ Falk J, Gaffney O, Bhowmik A K, et al. (2019). Exponential Roadmap 1.5. Future Earth. Sweden.

¹⁵ HLPE. (2015). Water for food security and nutrition. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN.

¹⁶ FAO. (2020). The state of world fisheries and aquaculture 2020. Sustainability in action. Rome: FAO.



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mangrove forests, the spread of parasites and diseases, introduction of non-native species, misuse of chemicals, and release of wastes.

With the global population projected to increase by over 2 billion by 2050, and rising incomes and urbanization driving a global transition toward diets with a higher proportion of animal-source foods, environmental systems and processes will be pushed even further beyond planetary boundaries.¹⁷ A business-as-usual food system risks potentially irreversible impacts on the planet, making it an increasingly inhospitable place for humans and wildlife.¹⁸ In addition to significantly contributing to global warming, the food system will suffer from a hotter, drier world, with food supplies and their nutritional quality threatened.

Alongside the growing environmental impacts of unsustainable food consumption, we see increasing nutrition-related chronic diseases. Globally, rates of non-communicable diseases linked to diets are soaring, with 2 billion people either overweight or obese, and food-related illnesses now the leading cause of death globally.¹⁹ This trend is mainly driven by (a) under-consumption of healthier foods (such as nuts, fruits, vegetables and legumes), (b) over-consumption of less healthy foods (including refined grains, highly processed foods and added sugars) and (c) increased consumption of protein derived from animals more often than derived from plants. At the same time, nearly 700 million are chronically undernourished, while millions of children suffer from stunting and wasting due to poor nutrition.

To address these food-related environmental and health challenges, WWF believes we must reboot and redesign the global food system. Governments, businesses, and civil society organizations increasingly understand that human health and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked. Together we can and must put in place effective policies, processes and structures that give everyone access to affordable, healthy and sustainable food. WWF is committed to working with all stakeholders to achieve this goal.

WWF's core Food goal: A food system which protects and conserves nature while ensuring there is enough nutritious food for all current and future generations.

WWF aims to help build a global food system that operates within planetary boundaries and universally meets the fundamental human right to healthy food. To motivate our efforts, WWF has developed four *guiding principles* for healthy and sustainable diets.

Guiding Principle 1: Promote food choices that reduce environmental impacts while improving human health.

WWF discourages over-consumption of any food, to the extent that over-consumption negatively impacts biodiversity, the environment and human health. In particular, a large body of evidence has shown that reducing over-consumption of animal-sourced foods, by increasing the relative consumption of plant-based foods, confers both environmental and health benefits. Accordingly, WWF promotes: agro-biodiversity²⁰ and food choices that shift the balance of diets toward more plant-based foods where animal-source foods (both wild and domestic) are over-consumed; emphasizes the importance of less and better meat consumption from well managed and sustainable production systems; and reduces reliance on wild meat where possible. There exists, however, wide variation in dietary habits and nutritional status globally and WWF recognizes that animal-source foods are often an important source of vital nutrients. Any reduction in the consumption of animal-

¹⁷ Steffen W, Richardson K, Rockström JR, et al. (2015). Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet. *Science* 347 (6223).

¹⁸ Steffen W, Rockström J, Richardson K, et al. (2018). Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene. *PNAS* 115 (33): 8252-8259

¹⁹ Global Nutrition Report (2020). Action on equity to end malnutrition. Bristol, UK: Development Initiatives.

²⁰ Convention on Biological Diversity. What is Agricultural Biodiversity? <https://www.cbd.int/agro/whatis.shtml>



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source foods should not come at the expense of human health. This implies a higher priority and responsibility for increasing the share of plant-based foods in the diets of social groups and countries that currently have high per capita consumption rates of animal-source foods, relative to global averages.

Guiding Principle 2: Promote food choices that support production that protects, conserves and restores biodiversity and sustainably uses natural resources.

WWF supports food that is produced within planetary boundaries. This requires producing food in ways that: 1) feeds humanity on the same or ideally less cropland than today – i.e. zero expansion of new cropland, or any agricultural land at the expense of natural habitats; 2) protects and conserves all natural ecosystems, including marine and freshwater systems and coastal habitats, and the wildlife they support and depend on; 3) moves toward zero loss of biodiversity; 4) contributes to resilient landscapes and preserves the ecosystem functions upon which food production depends; 5) reduces food loss and waste. While WWF believes sustainable food production must follow these five criteria and promotes agrobiodiversity, in particular local agrobiodiversity such as the cultivation of orphan crops, we do not propose a single type of production practice because a diversity of production systems will be needed to feed nearly 10 billion people healthy diets within planetary boundaries.

Guiding Principle 3: Embrace flexible food choices that are healthy and sustainable and that embody rich and diverse diets and traditions globally.

WWF does not believe in a “one-size fits all” diet. Rather, healthy and sustainable diets should reflect the rich diversity of diets, culinary traditions, and needs around the world. This may include the many dimensions of an individual’s life such as cultural identity, geography, and livelihood, as well as the changing nutritional needs of individuals at different life stages (e.g. lactating, pregnant, young, and old). WWF does not, therefore, promote a single type of diet but instead embraces and celebrates dietary flexibility, so long as it adheres to principles 1 and 2 as defined above. We adopt this approach out of respect for cultural traditions and individual choices and also because debates over various dietary patterns can hamper efforts to find and promote a diversity of healthy and sustainable food choices that work for all people on the planet.

Guiding Principle 4: Support just transitions to healthy and sustainable diets for all, with fair and equitable sharing of the costs and benefits arising from these transitions.

The transition to healthy and sustainable diets will alter social, economic and environmental conditions for many people. Some of the systemic changes needed in our food system will provide opportunities and benefits, while in other cases there may be challenges that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups. While the environmental and health benefits of transitioning towards healthy and sustainable diets are well documented, the consequences for food producers, processors, and other workers are less known. WWF will fight, wherever possible, for governments, the private sector and other stakeholders to ensure equitable access to affordable healthy and sustainable food for all, and to ease, incentivize, and support the transition for those who are most adversely affected.

EXPIRY: This position statement was accepted on 22 September 2020. WWF will review this statement at least every 24 months considering advances in empirical understanding and scientific knowledge.