Rise of the Climavore

There's growing interest in making food choices based on climate impact

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

For many of us, the foods we select to eat often are based on the impact they have on our health or the welfare of animals. For some, eating low-fat meals is a way to reduce cholesterol and keep off the pounds. For others, the decision to consume a plant-based diet is a moral one, based on the argument that causing animals to suffer when other food alternatives are readily available is wrong.

But in recent years, there's been a growing interest in choosing foods not for health or animal welfare but instead for — or in addition to — the environment.

In an Earth Day survey released last year, global management consulting firm Kearney examined the climate impact of consumer food choices and looked at the increased interest in "climavorism," which it defines as "the making of mindful food purchasing and consumption choices based on their impact on climate and the larger environment."

For the study, 1,000 consumers across the U.S. were polled on their awareness of, and attitudes toward, the relationship between their eating preferences and current climate crises.

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

So what is a "climavore?" Unlike vegetarians or vegans, whose diets are defined by ingredients, climavores, or climatarians, practice climate-conscious eating — that is, making dietary trade-offs intended to benefit the planet.

Corey Chafin, associate partner in Kearney's consumer practice and the study's principal author, said in a press release, "Daily food choice is a call to action for consumers keen to make a positive impact on climate outcomes, with nearly one-third of consumers in our survey considering environmental impact at the grocery store."

For example, climavores believe that switching protein sources can help alleviate their impact on the environment. You don't have to become vegan, or even vegetarian, to have a positive impact. Choosing chicken or soy over beef can reduce your individual climate footprint.

According to a report by the EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, and Health, two-thirds of our protein in 1900 came from plant sources. By the late 20th century, that number was reversed, "with more than two-thirds of our protein coming from animals, primarily beef cattle."
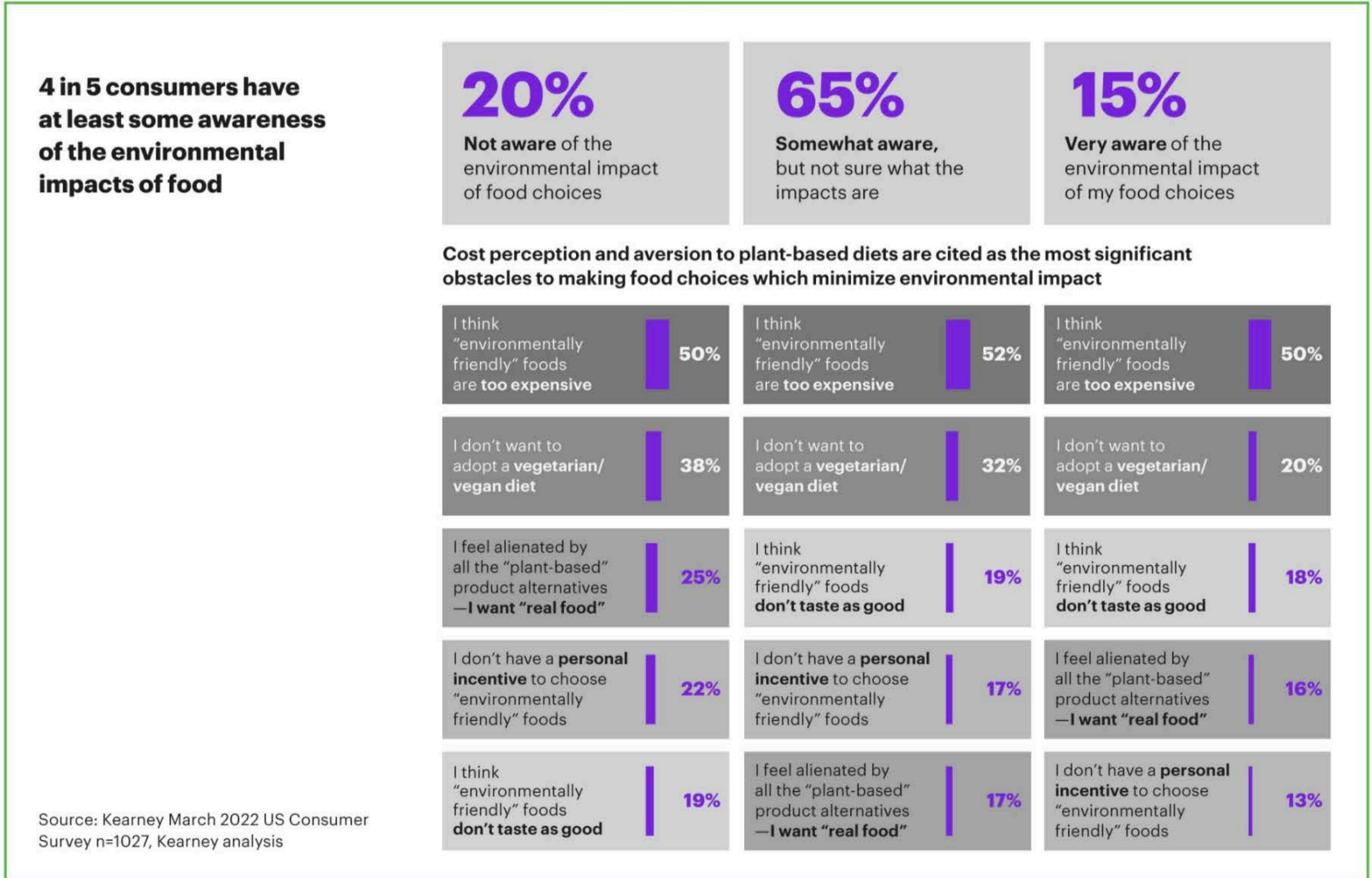
In a follow-up editorial, The Lancet wrote, "Intensive meat production is on an unstoppable trajectory comprising the single greatest contributor to climate change. Humanity's dominant diets are not good for us, and they are not good for the planet."

As a society, our carbon literacy is very low. The average American's annual carbon footprint is 17.5 tons of carbon dioxide. By comparison, the footprint of the average resident of the United Kingdom is 8.3 tons.

The food we buy adds up to about 20% of our carbon footprint. And Americans consume food at least three times a day.

Carbon footprint isn't just about how much gas you use or how long you keep the lights on. It is the measure of the amount of greenhouse gasses produced during a particular activity. The most common greenhouse gas is carbon dioxide or CO_2. Methane, which is generated in the cattle industry, is another common greenhouse gas; it is 25 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Nitrous oxide is the most potent, at 298 times that of CO_2, according to Clever Carbon, an organization whose goal is to raise carbon footprint literacy and create a carbon literate

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4 in 5 consumers have at least some awareness of the environmental impacts of food

20%
Not aware of the environmental impact of food choices

65%
Somewhat aware, but not sure what the impacts are

15%
Very aware of the environmental impact of my food choices

Cost perception and aversion to plant-based diets are cited as the most significant obstacles to making food choices which minimize environmental impact

I think "environmentally friendly" foods are **too expensive** — 50%	I think "environmentally friendly" foods are **too expensive** — 52%	I think "environmentally friendly" foods are **too expensive** — 50%
I don't want to adopt a **vegetarian/vegan diet** — 38%	I don't want to adopt a **vegetarian/vegan diet** — 32%	I don't want to adopt a **vegetarian/vegan diet** — 20%
I feel alienated by all the "plant-based" product alternatives —**I want "real food"** — 25%	I think "environmentally friendly" foods **don't taste as good** — 19%	I think "environmentally friendly" foods **don't taste as good** — 18%
I don't have a **personal incentive** to choose "environmentally friendly" foods — 22%	I don't have a **personal incentive** to choose "environmentally friendly" foods — 17%	I feel alienated by all the "plant-based" product alternatives —**I want "real food"** — 16%
I think "environmentally friendly" foods **don't taste as good** — 19%	I feel alienated by all the "plant-based" product alternatives —**I want "real food"** — 17%	I don't have a **personal incentive** to choose "environmentally friendly" foods — 13%

Source: Kearney March 2022 US Consumer Survey n=1027, Kearney analysis

society in order to accelerate reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, reach net-zero targets faster, and create scalable technologies and solutions.

When it comes to food, a single ingredient's footprint is affected by a variety of factors: growing, harvesting, storing, transporting, retail, consumption, and post consumption or waste products.

For example, producing a potato emits 1.41 ounces of CO_2 into the atmosphere. A cup of drip coffee emits 1.76 ounces. A single serving of chicken emits almost 3 pounds of CO_2, and a single serving of beef emits almost 17 pounds. One pound of USDA ground beef has 83.79 pounds of $KgCO_2eq$ (methane) emissions.

While Americans are eating less beef today than they did in the 1970s — and even in the early 2000s — a 2006 report by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization found producing a half-pound of hamburger — a patty of meat the size of two decks of cards — releases as much greenhouse gas into the atmosphere as driving a 3,000-pound car nearly 10 miles. The annual beef diet of the average American emits as much greenhouse gas as a car driven more than 1,800 miles.

So already you can see the impact of different types of foods.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

"Food companies must add 'Climate Impact' to the product re-formulation and design-to-value campaigns to prepare for the rise of the climavore consumer," Chafin noted in the press release.

Some restaurant chains are doing just that.

New York-based eatery Just Salad was the first quick-service restaurant chain to carbon label its menu in 2020. The chain, which has always partnered with local sources for their produce and which offers a reusable bowl program to help eliminate waste, features a "Climatarian" option on its menu that allows diners to filter foods with the lowest carbon footprint.

Carbon-friendly menu items include a label that expresses the item's $kgCO_2$ value. This stands for "kilograms of carbon dioxide equivalent," which shows emissions for many greenhouse gasses, not just carbon dioxide. All labels are verified by Planet FWD, a leading carbon management platform.

"It is really more important if we are trying to reduce the carbon footprint of the food system, which accounts for 26% to 30% of global emissions, to talk a little less about local these days and more about shifting diets. 'How low can you go?' on carbon has very little to do about transportation and more to do with composition of what is in your food," said Sandra Noonan, Just Salad's chief sustainability officer during a panel at the 2022 SXSW Conference.

Following the launch of Just Salad's Climatarian menu, St. Louis-based bakery-cafe chain Panera Bread announced its "Cool Foods" menu, which labels items that are "cooler" or more climate friendly.

Panera partnered with the World Resources Institute to analyze the ingredients of every entrée at the restaurant and certify those foods that align with globally recognized climate goals.

According to WRI, a Cool Food Meal is defined as "a meal that would help a consumer eat a diet with a food-related greenhouse gas emissions intensity falling at least 38% below the regional average diet." The carbon budget is split across three meals plus snacks. Breakfast must be no more than 20% of the recommended daily carbon footprint, and lunch and dinner must be less than 30% each. This equates to no more than 8.4 pounds CO_2e (carbon dioxide-equivalent) for breakfast and 12.6 pounds for lunch or dinner. For example, the chain's Mexican Street Corn Chowder has a CO_2e emission of 4.2 pounds, and the Turkey Sandwich comes in at 8.5 pounds. On the other hand, the total greenhouse gas emissions of the Toasted Steak & White Cheddar sandwich are 72.44 pounds, making it a non-Cool Food Meal.

"If you want to be a climate smart eater, which means going as low as you can on carbon values, there's a lot more nuance to the conversation about eating sustainably than we realize," Noonan said.

SOLUTION?

So what can you do to help reduce your effects of food production on the planet? The local movement is a great way to start, as it reduces the need for transportation. Composting — or end-of-life — also reduces an item's footprint. Additional choices that yield surprisingly large results include eating seasonally, avoiding excessive packaging, eating what you buy, purchasing misshapen or imperfect produce, and reducing meat and dairy consumption.

By choosing more wisely, we can all make a difference. 🌿