



Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret Discussion Guide

Directors: Kip Andersen, Keegan Kuhn
Year: 2014
Time: 85 min

You might know these directors from:
This is the debut full-length film from both of these directors.

FILM SUMMARY

Affected by such things as rising water levels, increasing droughts, tempestuous weather patterns, and loss of native wildlife, we are all citizens of the same troubled planet. The increase of electric cars, clean energy sources, and local food production highlight that sustainability is the catchword of our time.

Before embarking on COWSPIRACY, co-directors Andersen and Kuhn were already on the highly-engaged end of the environmentalist spectrum. Like many of us, they thought fossil fuels and water waste were the major culprit and played their part in reducing their consumption. However, when Andersen read a U.N. article on the effects of animal agriculture on the planet, he was shocked. How had this passed beneath his green radar?

What better place to learn more than at the environmental agencies assigned the task of protecting the planet? Met with an onslaught of interview refusals, the few answers that Andersen did get to his question, "Why aren't we talking about animal agriculture?" sounded something like "That's not my area" or "I'd rather not comment on that." The directors were intrigued by the organizations' hesitancy and COWSPIRACY began to take shape. As Greenpeace's Will Anderson tells him, "The environmental community is failing us and failing ecosystems."

COWSPIRACY presents a plethora of jaw-dropping facts and statistics on how humanity's dependence on meat and dairy is one of the leading contributors to climate change, and questions why no one wants to talk about it. Rather than taking a doomsday approach, the filmmakers present the choice to adopt a vegan diet. "A plant-based diet is the most sustainable," states Michael Pollan. By featuring those charting out a new model and approaching the topic in a personal level, COWSPIRACY delivers a brutally tender tale. With Howard Lyman's ending words, "You can change the world. You must change the world," you may feel inclined to do just that.

FILM THEMES

When Kip Andersen learns that animal agriculture and human consumption of meat and dairy is one of the leading contributors to climate change, he uncovers an issue with immense ramifications.

THE SUSTAINABILITY SECRET

“Raising and killing animals for food is really what’s killing the planet,” announces Demosthenes Maratos of The Sustainability Institute. This bold declaration serves as the backbone for COWSPIRACY, something co-directors Andersen and Kuhn are determined to uncover and understand. With society handed a long list of factors affecting climate change and encouraged to make multiple changes to behavior and habit, it seems extraordinary that one of leading contributors to global warming and planetary destruction hasn’t made the cut.

MONEY WIELDS ITS MAGIC WAND

Who hit the mute button on discussing the connection between animal agriculture and climate change? Arguably, money has the power to drive corruption and inspire skewed decision making. “If you cause a disruption in the profits of the animal industry, you’re guilty under the Patriot Act,” states former rancher Howard Lyman. As the most financially fruitful powerhouses in the U.S., the meat and dairy industries wield incredible might over political agendas. As for the promise of NGOs to protect the planet’s ecosystem and people, their agendas also seem to be influenced by the power of these lucrative industries.

THE FEAR

The more Andersen learns about the detrimental impact of animal agriculture on the planet’s water, rainforests, air quality, oceans, and overall health, he wonders why no one is broaching the subject. Many directors at the NGOs he interviews deny his accusations. Then he is warned, those who do agree speak of threats, imprisonment, even death. A fear is apparent in each individual who dares to address his concerns. The governmental machine is powerful, and with laws in place to protect the steady flow of profitability for those feeding the greed, it is a courageous move that the filmmakers continue with their feature.

THE SUSTAINABLE ANSWER? VEGANISM

Once the facts and figures have been presented, the arguments drawn, and the case is presented that animal agriculture is the leading cause of an unsustainable existence, both for people and planet, only one option remains—veganism. In the words of Howard Lyman, “You can’t be an environmentalist and eat animal products. Period.” Have we come that far? Where the call for such a profound change in behavior across the board is so strong that humanity faces up to our lifestyles and adapts a different way of life altogether? “No other lifestyle choice has a farther reaching and more profoundly positive impact on the planet and all life on earth than choosing to stop consuming animals and live a vegan life,” purports Demosthenes Maratos. If veganism could steer our planet in a sustainable and healthy direction, perhaps more of us will adopt a plant-based diet.

“It’s an environmental disaster that’s being ignored by the very people who should be championing deforestation, land use, water scarcity, the destabilization of communities, world hunger.”

Demosthenes Maratos

“A lot of people keep their mouths shut. They don’t want to be the next one with the bullet to their head.”

Leila Salazar-López, Amazon Watch

FILM FACTS:

- COWSPIRACY had its world premiere at the San Francisco Green Film Festival in 2014. A new cut of the film, which was executive-produced by Leonardo DiCaprio, premiered globally on Netflix in September 2015.
- The directors funded film production through IndieGoGo, reaching their initial goal of \$54,000 in six days. In the end all donations came from individuals—no companies supported the film financially, and those that chose to retract their initial funding did so due to the fact that they supported organizations interviewed in the film. A total of \$117,092 was raised, which enabled the film to be subtitled in Spanish, German, French, Dutch, Polish, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish, Russian, Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, Portuguese, Hindi, Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Slovak, Estonian, Czech, Turkish, and Hebrew.
- The directors originally set out to interview NGOs on animal agriculture, which prevented them from securing interviews. When they instead mentioned they were making a film on sustainability, NGOs were more open to meet.
- Andersen screened COWSPIRACY to the European Parliament in Brussels in December 2015. So affected by the film, two parliament members purchased 750 copies of the DVD as holiday gifts for each and every parliamentarian.
- The first animal-free cookbook was published in London, England, in 1849.
- The Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, signed into law by President Bush in 2006 as an amendment to 1992's Animal Enterprise Protection Act, grants the U.S. Department of Justice greater rights in silencing the protest activities of animal and environmental advocates.
- Howard Lyman, the Montana cattle farmer turned animal rights activist, has been vegan since 1991. The growth of a tumor on his spinal cord in 1979 forced him to take a closer look at his life, which inspired his assessments of the U.S. food industry. When he appeared on The Oprah Winfrey Show in 1996 and convinced her to stop eating hamburgers, he was sued by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.
- The term vegan, which represents a lifestyle devoid of animal exploitation, was coined in 1944 by Donald Watson, the founder of the Vegan Society of England, the world's oldest vegan organization. Notable vegans include Stevie Wonder, Demi Moore, Carl Lewis, and Al Gore.
- According to the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization, 38% of the world's land is used for agriculture, poultry birds account for 80% of all livestock, and the total world water withdrawal for agriculture is 95%. Many more facts can be found on the COWSPIRACY [infographic](#).
- In 1965 the average American ate 166 pounds of meat and poultry annually. That number was up to 224 pounds in 2004, and down to 211 in 2015.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Take** the [30-Day Vegan Challenge](#) as provided on the film's website, with informative podcasts and engaging videos to encourage you along.
2. **Learn** more about director Andersen's [Animals United Movement](#), a media organization setting out "to effectively and efficiently represent a harmonious voice for all life on this planet."
3. **Read** "[MEATHOOKED: The History and Science of Our 2.5-Million-Years Obsession With Meat](#)," written by science author and travel writer Marta Zaraska examining the evolutionary, cultural, taste, marketing, biochemical, and anthropological reasons why humans are so hooked on meat.
4. **Challenge** your own food perceptions by analyzing how much meat and/or dairy you eat in a single day.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.