Intensive Agriculture: Impact on Animals and the Planet

(AXE RESPONSABILITE)

Food is big business. Multinational corporations oversee vast production facilities, churning out incredible amounts of food for an ever-growing population, and amassing tremendous profits all the while. Demand for cheaper food, in greater volumes, and with lower production costs are among the confluence of factors that have fuelled the rise of a system of intensive agriculture that dominates much of the world today. But this isn't how it once was, and it shouldn't be assumed that intensive farming is the only way to go – or that it is even a way we should go. This presentation will explore what this farming method really is, what the implications are, and how to evolve beyond it.

Types Of Intensive Farming

Intensive farming can be non-industrial, in which human labor is still a significant factor in achieving high yields, or industrial, meaning operations that are largely mechanized. Because of its prevalence within North America, industrial intensive farming will be the focus of this presentation.

Disadvantages Of Intensive Agriculture

In many ways, the disadvantages of intensive farming tend to outweigh benefits, particularly when it comes to animal products since these are not essential for human health (and especially not in the volumes at which they are currently consumed in places like the United States).

Environmental Disadvantages

One of the most troubling environmental disadvantages to industrial agriculture is its contributions to climate change. Globally, agriculture is one of the largest drivers of anthropogenic climate change, accounting for 12% of total emissions, and nearly a quarter of greenhouse gas emissions. Industrial crop production hampers the ability of soil to act as a carbon sequester, ultimately turning it into a carbon emitter. Animal agriculture (most of which is raised intensively) accounts for large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions, including 37% of all methane emissions and 65% of nitrous oxide.

Beyond climatic concerns, intensive agriculture produces vast amounts of pollution. Some of the largest dairy farms in the United States can have more than 15,000 cows, producing more waste than can be used as fertilizer on surrounding fields, meaning that much of it collects in open waste lagoons. These pose serious pollution risks to ground and surface water, considering that a farm with only 200 cows can produce as much nitrogen as a community of up to 10,000 people. Runoff from such farms can cause algae blooms, which can devastate freshwater, brackish, and saltwater ecosystems.

Deforestation

Deforestation is an unfortunately common issue within intensive agriculture. One high-profile example comes from palm oil plantations, which have been running roughshod over the forests of Indonesia and Malaysia for years. The palm oil fruit contains a highly versatile oil, used in many products for sale in North American including ice cream, cookies, and shampoo. Massive swaths of forests have been burned and cleared to make way for palm oil monocrops, violating indigenous people's rights and pushing iconic species such as the orangutan to the brink of extinction.

Conclusion

Intensive agriculture may be efficient, but it comes at great cost to humans, animals, and the environment. Multinational corporations have pushed the earth and animals to the limits, in pursuit of ever-soaring profits. Yet this system is unstable and ultimately unsustainable. Extensive farming, and other such alternatives, can be viable options, especially if dietary habits are changed, and fewer animal products are consumed in wealthy nations. The future generations of individuals on this planet are owed an exploration of alternatives before it is too late.

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