

Numbers Don't Lie

Meat-Eating Is as Human as Apple Pie

We evolved to eat meat; the world will not turn vegan



“**N**othing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution,” the eminent geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky wrote in 1973. That goes for the human diet.

We are omnivores, not herbivores. Natural selection has formed us to eat both plant and animal foods and to like doing so. Chimpanzees, the primates that are genetically the closest to us, deliberately hunt, kill, and eat small monkeys, wild pigs, and tortoises, annually consuming 4 to 12 kilograms of meat per capita for the entire population and up

Since 1970, there has been a 55 percent increase in worldwide average per capita meat consumption.

to 25 kg per adult male; that is more than in many preindustrial farming societies.

It is well to keep this biological fact in mind when considering outlandish claims about the imminent victory of veganism. We are told that much of the world is trending toward plant-based eating, and it is expected that the global demand for that diet will nearly quintuple between 2016 and 2026. Are we in fact seeing a revolutionary change in behavior?

Half a century is surely plenty of time to discern a trend, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization has the relevant data. The world's production of meat and poultry reached about 100 million tonnes in 1970, 233 million tonnes in 2000, and 325 million tonnes in 2020. That represents a tripling since 1970. Even after accounting for the intervening population growth, per capita meat consumption rose by 55 percent during the past 50 years. This is as you would expect, because as people get richer they can buy more of the food they really want.

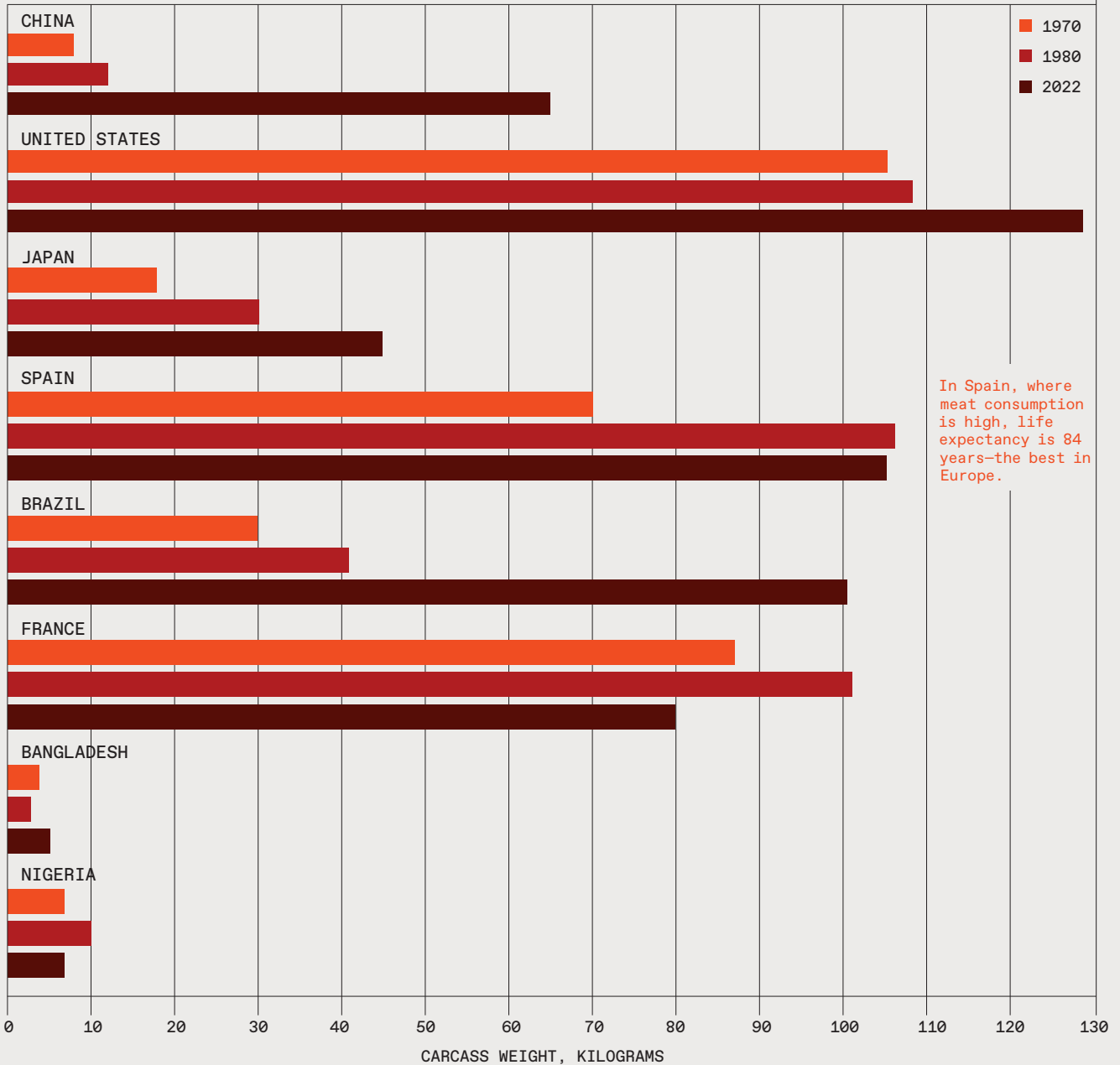
There have been many variations, arising from differences in religion, incomes, and shifting tastes. Of all the populous nations, only Bangladesh, India, Ethiopia, and Nigeria continue to eat very little meat. In 2020, average supply rates in India and Bangladesh were still below 5 kg of carcass weight per year, per capita—a bit less than in Ethiopia. But in most of the world's populous countries, per capita meat supply has increased spectacularly during the past 50 years: In Pakistan it has doubled (still only to 16 kg); in Turkey and the Philippines, the rate has more than doubled (in both countries to nearly 40 kg); it has tripled in Egypt (to about 30 kg); Brazil's supply has more than tripled, to 100 kg; and in China it rose more than sevenfold, from only about 9 to just over 60 kg.

Not surprisingly, meat consumption has changed little in highly carnivorous countries, including Canada, Italy, and the United Kingdom, and it has declined a bit in Denmark, France, and Germany. This small decline does constitute a trend, having to do with the avoidance of fatty red meat by many younger consumers, higher intakes of seafood, and the conversion of very small numbers of people to largely vegetarian (if not entirely vegan) diets. This moderation is indeed a welcome shift, because the nutritional benefits of meat are not predicated on consuming it in large amounts.

Yet even in those rich countries in which the consumption of meat has reached new heights, such



AVERAGE ANNUAL PER CAPITA MEAT CONSUMPTION



In Spain, where meat consumption is high, life expectancy is 84 years—the best in Europe.

PORTRAIT BY SERGIO ALBIAC; CHART SOURCE: FOOD BALANCE SHEET (2020); FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE U.N.

as Australia, Brazil, Canada, and the United States, it has led to no demonstrable ill effects on health. Spain is the best example: Since 1975, its average meat supply has more than doubled, peaking at 120 kg in 2002 before dropping back to today's 100 kg. This rise in meat demand was accompanied by a

decline in deaths from cardiovascular disease.

In 2019, before COVID could affect survival rates, Spain had a life expectancy at birth (for males and females combined) of 84 years. That number is the highest in the European Union—notwithstanding all that *carne de cerdo asada, jamón, chorizo...* ■