



# Our Hen House

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## Interview with Dr. Oppenlander

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **DR. OPPENLANDER** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 230.*

JASMIN: Welcome to Our Hen House, Dr. Oppenlander.

DR. OPPENLANDER: Well, it's a pleasure to be here. Certainly I really enjoy the opportunity, so thanks for having me.

JASMIN: We're so excited to have you, and we've been a fan of your work for a very long time. And we were just so excited to hear about this newest book of yours, *Food Choice and Sustainability: Why Buying Local, Eating Less Meat, and Taking Baby Steps Won't Work*. And I guess I don't know if this is even possible on your end since there's a whole lot here to talk about, even just based on the title, let alone what's in the book. But can you tell us why it won't work in a nutshell?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Yeah, I sure can. In a nutshell, we're on various timelines, meaning that the resources that we're depleting and what we're currently doing to our planet really can only withstand certain amounts of time for each area of global depletion. And our normal methods of management, meaning how the media and the dissemination of most information in the world is occurring today and how policymakers are working, even within our own plant based movement, they don't correspond to the timelines that we're on. For instance, regardless of what movement it may be, if it involves any animal products whatsoever, it typically won't match up with the timelines that we're experiencing, whether it's climate change or water scarcity or land use inefficiency, let alone the timelines for our own sustainability for our own health.

So I think that's really what the subtitle and the book itself is intended to do, and that's why I wrote it, is to say, well, even within our own movement, we typically like to shy away from or allow people to move within their own timeframes towards the healthiest diet or nutritional plan, which is fully plant based. But typically those type of timelines still won't match up with what the planet needs. In other words, we can't keep saying, "Baby steps are all you need," because that really relates more to your own personal preferences, but I think we really need to start looking outside of yourself. We have to start looking at future generations and how we're affecting all animals. And when we talk about animals and animal welfare and things like that, I'm not talking about animals just from factory farms or animals that are directly in line of our plates, I'm talking about all the indirect effects we have on animals and species everywhere on our planet, which is vast.

MARIANN: Yeah. I hate talking to anybody who confirms my conviction that we're totally screwed. But you're not saying we're totally screwed. You're saying that we could get ourselves out of this if we all start acting very virtuous very quickly. But the thing is that food really is a very in topic and people really are talking about it much more than they have been before. Is anybody saying the right things?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Well, they're saying the right thing in the sense that we need to move toward a vegan diet, but they're not using the correct timelines. And I think that's the issue. That's paramount right now with the message we need to get across, whether you're talking about climate change or, as I said, any other area of global depletion which are all these areas of sustainability, they're not really in line with anything other than an immediate change. And that all of a sudden makes people want to draw back a little bit, but I'm here to explain that we can't wait any longer. In fact, certain timelines are closing on us right now, so if we wait as individuals just according to our own taste preferences, I kinda think that's a bit selfish, once you are aware of the facts. We first have to make people aware of the facts certainly. We can't chastise somebody for not moving in the right direction till they at least have the information in front of them. But after that, unless you use the word "now" or "today" or "immediately," I don't think that anybody's getting the right message now.

MARIANN: So what exactly should people be doing?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Well, I think that everyone should immediately move into a fully plant based diet and as organically grown, as whole as possible. And that's just the way it is. And it's interesting you're starting right out asking those questions because the most recent lecture series that I have related to this book, I just got back from one in the heart of dairy land. Well, second heart of dairy land now, but it's in Wisconsin, and basically I had a whole section on dairy. And a lot of their questions were about how we do this, how do we transition farms and things like that. But I have one section that talks about typewriters and feather quill pens and stagecoaches and pony expresses and things like that, that really we've evolved past because they don't fit. They're not efficient, and we've transitioned out of them because we basically have needed to evolve past them, and that's what I'm asking everybody to do about their dietary preferences.

JASMIN: Okay, let's unpack this a little bit. There are a lot of intertwined issues here, but can you address specifically the effect of food choice on climate change?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Yeah. Well, first of all I want to point out that more and more people are becoming aware of climate change and being concerned about it. There are a few people that just don't believe climate change, that we have anything to do with it. But nearly every scientist now, any noteworthy scientist, understands and can relate to you that climate change is very real and that anthropogenic, or human-induced greenhouse gases, the ones that we produce, are the ones that are basically causing the climate change. And so now I don't think that that's necessarily at all the only area of sustainability. It's the one that's in front of everybody right now and so we can talk about that first. But certainly water scarcity and land use inefficiencies and things like that, and especially what's going on with our oceans, are nearly as equal in terms of urgency and how dramatic is.

But in terms of climate change, sure it's very easy for many organizations and researchers and individuals to point the fingers at fossil fuel use and especially the burning of coal because it is a major contributor. It's most likely over 50%, most researchers think it's

around 65 or 70. But the fact is that our contribution by diet in terms of animal agriculture, whether it's livestock on land or aquaculture on land or by the fishing industry itself, the combined effects of our choices and demand to eat animals is extremely high. And there have been some studies, as most of your listeners will know, from Anhang and Goodland that put that figure at around 51%. But the United Nations really doesn't want anything to do with that because they were under so much fire from their 2006 livestock report that placed it at 18%, that in October they dropped the figure down to 14.5%, but there's a whole discussion we could have about that. And basically they've hidden a lot of the figures. There are a number of things wrong with it. I've been asked to speak on an international panel about this problem, about the numbers and where we are with all of the effects across the board of animal agriculture because the gold standard, meaning in somewhat of a facetious way because the United Nations that places these figures are all quite biased. The researchers and the authors of these studies are all consultants for the livestock industry. So they've hidden these figures, but nevertheless it's somewhere between most likely 20 and 50%, and I think it's closer to 30, 35, maybe even 40% of all greenhouse gases produced by humans come from our demand to eat animals.

MARIANN: So you had mentioned also the oceans and that things are getting worse and worse. And can you talk about how bad they are getting and how it's related to food choice?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Well, yeah, no question. There are really a couple different areas of difficulty when you're categorizing the health of our oceans. One is that there's really -- you'd need to begin discussions -- any discussions about the health of our oceans really have to first begin with frank discussions about land-based animal agriculture because, because of the greenhouse gases we just talked about and deforestation, it's really causing a warming and acidification of our oceans, greater than what we've seen over the last 300 million years. And at that time about 96% of the ecosystems have gone extinct. And it took about 30 million years to come back again. And there have been numerous studies showing that most of our commercially available fish will be extinct to that extent to less than 1% of them by the year 2048. Now, so there are really two different aspects of the health of our oceans. One is caused by warming and acidification, which is predominantly by greenhouse gas emissions, which is then caused by what we're eating on land. And the second aspect is that regardless of the warming and acidification, we have also nitrogen flooded dead zones, about 500 of them that comprise more than 95,000 square miles of areas that are devoid of life. And that's from runoff from livestock on land. And then lastly of course is from fishing. And I don't like to use the word overfishing because in my mind there's no commercial fishing that can be sustainable right now. And overfishing was a term that could be applied probably accurately back in the mid to late 1800s so now any type of commercial fishing is not sustainable at all. And a quick snapshot will show you that 95 to 96% of all large fish species have been depleted and about 85% of all oceanic fish species of over 1000 that have been studied have collapsed from fishing.

JASMIN: Wow.

MARIANN: So you use that term "sustainable," and I guess I felt this for a long time. Like, what do people mean when they use the term "sustainable," both as it relates to the oceans and as it relates to other things? What is wrong with the way most people are using that term?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Yeah, great question because as you know, the word “sustainable” can be seen anywhere. And it’s across the board used, almost abused, in terms of where you see it today. And typically most people will use it for policies, for their governing policies or in their objectives, just basically to make sure that everyone feels that it’s doing the right job. But for most people it refers to our energy sector and to waste and sometimes to social or economic sustainability. But rarely if ever is food choice positioned, and never is it positioned correctly. I’ve never seen any university or any corporate statement of responsibility that has the word positioned correctly with food choice, specifically as it relates to animal agriculture, which if you don’t position animal agriculture correctly in any discussions or policies of sustainability, you won’t be on the right track. I call it pseudo-sustainability. I feel like everybody’s getting on board this large ship and being navigated by individuals or organizations or policymakers that don’t have a navigation system that’s working. Their GPS system’s broken, and they’re all taking these people on a trip thinking they’re gonna get to sustainability but they’re not. So I’m asking everybody to sort of switch that out and use more the term relative sustainability, or more optimal. How do you achieve sustainability if you’re not producing the highest level of sustainable foods? And the only way to do that is by using plant based foods.

JASMIN: Well, speaking of sustainability, I know that one of your talks centers around grass-fed beef and how this is a popular misconception widely, especially around sustainability. And I’m wondering if you could speak to the fact that there’s absolutely nothing sustainable about the grass-fed movement.

DR. OPPENLANDER: No, worse, it’s more unsustainable than grain-fed. And what I mean by that is that over the 20, 30, 40 countries that I visited, and in the United States, out of all of the farms that I visited and interviewed, the average amount of land and water, the resources that it takes to produce whatever you want to call food from raising and slaughtering an animal like that over a period of 18 months to 36 months the average, it requires many more resources. And in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, it produces more, 40 to 60% more methane is produced per one grass-fed cow. So it’s interesting because actually a few of my interviews on farm on site, the proprietor, the operator of a grass-fed operation, admitted that there’s no way that his operation is sustainable. We’ve even talked to a few dairy farmers like that that were using or producing grass-fed or organic milk and they admitted the fact. They knew their numbers, in other words, in terms of how much land was being used and how much resources were being used and how much greenhouse gas emissions were being emitted.

So you’re exactly right. It’s not only not sustainable, it’s more unsustainable than even grain-fed beef, which is horrendous. And one other thing I want to point out, that even though I don’t discuss a great deal about welfare or the humane management, I do a great deal in my last chapter. I’m sure you saw that. But in most of my lectures I don’t because I feel like there are so many other wonderful speakers and authors. And for instance a great site called Our Hen House manages that pretty well too. But really it’s true, so I believe that most of my efforts should be more along the lines of an environmental aspect. But I do want to point out that as you read in my book, and as you know I’m sure, there really isn’t any separation at all. In fact sometimes it’s more gruesome at the tail end of their lives, how they’re killed, in terms of the management of animals that are raised on grass-fed operations versus just factory farms and how they’re actually slaughtered. And so the word “humane” is such a relative term and it doesn’t apply at all to -- there is no humane way.

And I know you know this, but after looking at how these operations take their animals and move them off the farm, off the grass-fed operation into the slaughter line and then eventually killed is just exactly the same.

MARIANN: Yeah, it's all a horror. But it does seem like it's really, these things seem so obvious to us. And it seems that people are living on these myths from the past of things like grass-fed, and also the local thing. Can you talk a little bit about why local has just taken over the whole movement of sustainability and why it's stupid, to put lightly?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Great term for it. Yeah, well, at its heart, the local movement somewhat makes sense. And as I explain in the book and in my lectures, I have a great part to that in terms of dispelling that myth that basically, for supporting farms and operations that are near your home, from an economic standpoint it makes sense. The difficulty is that there's only 4% of all the fossil fuels used and all the greenhouse gases used in the entire food production process comes from transportation. So it makes much more sense to purchase, in terms of from an environmental standpoint and an animal rights or welfare standpoint, and then from your own human health sustainability standpoint, it makes much more sense to support fully whole organically grown plant based foods that are grown 3000 miles away than it is to support any animal product produced by your next door neighbor. And this is something that just has to be understood. And I have all the facts and figures and anybody can look those up in my book, and it's very easy then to use that to augment your either knowledge or discussions in conversation about it, to equip yourself, just to empower yourself with better understanding. But it's really sad that it's all these movements in the same way though, whether you're talking about organic or local or sustainable or farm-to-table or real food, cool food, urban agriculture, they're all the same. If they involve any animal agriculture whatsoever it doesn't fit with the word "sustainable."

JASMIN: And yet it's all the rage everywhere, and it seems to me that when we learn about these issues, and certainly for those of us who have learned about animal issues and it turned our lives upside down and we thought, "Well, how could I not have known this?!" And there's always that anger period at the beginning. Let's talk about the media and the way the media deals with food issues. Why isn't this information more widely available?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Well, it's probably one of the most difficult topics we have right now is that, okay, let's say we become aware of all this information, in terms of especially the sustainability aspect and the timelines. Well, it's just very difficult for those in the media or policymakers or businesses, but especially those with platforms, to spell all this out to their audience because I feel, well, one of three things. One is that they're truly comfortably unaware, they just don't know. But the ones that do know that might be partially aware, there are a couple different reasons why they don't bring it to the forefront. One is that they typically still consume animals themselves, and I often say, how can we expect one of our leaders to guide us to health and restoration of our planet if they can't even do it for themselves? And another large reason is that they're afraid. They literally are afraid they're gonna lose their audience, and this includes very, very smart people with large platforms that are considered some of the most influential people.

One of the 100 most influential people, voted 100 most influential people on the planet is Michael Pollan. And I don't believe that he's a dummy, by any means, okay? He's a very smart person, but he himself eats animals, and he doesn't want to lose his audience. I've walked into different college campuses and spoke right after him, and I have one one-

thousandth of the audience that he has, and it's because he states what everybody wants to hear: Go ahead and continue eating animals, but let's just do it in kind of a way that has a façade to it of being a little bit smarter, like grass-fed for instance. And so they're either unaware or they continue eating animals themselves, which he does, or they're afraid of losing their audience. And one other thing is that a few are very afraid of the industries themselves. And as you know the meat, dairy, and fishing industries are very, very powerful, and they wield the big stick. And we can go back to the Oprah example. A lot of these individuals or businesses with large platforms just don't want to tangle with it. We have a documentary that's gonna be coming out, actually a couple of them, and one of them deals with this topic about why environmental groups aren't addressing the issue, the ones we give all of our money to, and why they're afraid. And so it should be very interesting. I'm hoping that everybody'll have a chance to see that.

MARIANN: When can we expect that?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Well, the first one is gonna be coming out in about a month, and I can't say too much more about it but it's basically gonna be, it's an incredible set of interviews with the directors of these environmental groups that are supposed to be protecting us, but yet fail to address the aspect of animal agriculture. And then the other one's gonna be coming out in the fall. And I'll keep you posted on that for sure, on both of them.

MARIANN: That's great. So on a macro level that explains something about why the media is failing this. What about on an individual, personal level? A lot of people say, and they're not without having a point, that their individual choices are too small to have an impact, so why should I change? How do you address that?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Well, there are a couple things about that. I guess first of all, let's look at the individual, and then let's look at what the collective aspect is. As an individual first of all, I think that term "relative sustainability" should come into play too. I think that on a daily basis, and you know this very well, you have a choice and you can either choose to consume products that are not compassionate, they condone slaughtering unnecessarily, and at this stage in terms of my topic they condone the use of resources that are depleting our planet in an irreversible manner that's going to affect future generations. So on a personal basis you should ask yourself, say for instance, meatless on Monday campaign, which is very large, as you know, and getting larger every day. Well, I often say that if you do this, if you choose to eat meatless on Mondays, presuming you're eating animal products on most of the other days of the week which most of the public does, 98%, essentially, 97% of everybody in the world does, if you do go meatless on Mondays, well then you're contributing to pollution, climate change, and global depletion of our resources and your own health on only six days of the week instead of seven. And so I ask them, why do you want to rest on your laurels of what you're doing right only one seventh of the time? So that's more on an individual basis. And actually being an example for all those around you, if we ended up moving this forward on a grassroots basis, it would be incredibly effective starting today.

Now in a collective manner we do have to move. No one can get to a point of sustainability really by themselves. You can surround yourself with a little oasis of sorts and try to get there, but the world as a whole has to -- we have to move the critical mass. I mean, that's the way sustainability is. If you're going from Point A to point B, you have to kind of move

everybody with you. I mentioned that ship that everybody's on going, floating around in pseudo-sustainability. Well, we have to get new navigators for that ship with a new navigation system essentially showing them how to get there and include food choice in the correct manner, or none of us will make it. And this reverts back to our timelines that we're on. We have to do this together or we're all gonna suffer from climate change. We're all gonna suffer from water scarcity. We're all gonna continue contributing to the ill health of our oceans which are dying and to world hunger and et cetera and especially loss of biodiversity.

So I think everyone needs to start looking outside of self. Everyone should have core values, certainly, and one of those has to be, let's do the very best thing, not only for ourselves, but let's start thinking about others that we share. And by others, I mean every being, every life form, every species on this planet, and for all those in the future. That's really the way that we need to start looking at things, in sort of a more selfless manner. We don't want to be remembered, I don't think -- there are a few, we know this -- but I think the majority of the population on this planet would not want to be remembered as those that destroyed the planet for future generations. I just don't think that's true. I mean, my father might take that other role. He is always talking about that climate change is not real and everything that lives here on this planet is for us to consume. And there are people like that, believe me. But I think as a whole, if we can start this awareness pattern and especially related to these timelines and start looking at it outside of self, I think that we can make a huge difference and it can be enough difference to where we stay within these timelines and actually be remembered as the generation that saved the planet.

JASMIN: Well, my brother and your father should meet because they would have a lot to talk about as they're eating their steaks, it sounds like. But when I'm talking to my brother about these issues, he thinks the animals were put there for us and all of this. We've all heard that before. But the minute I bring up world hunger, his ears perk up a little bit because he has a little daughter and I know that, I think that kind of gets to him for some reason. He doesn't want to think that he's directly contributing to world hunger. So you did just mention that within the context of other issues, but can you speak more directly to how food choices in the US affect world hunger?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Yeah. One quick thing. I hope you don't mind, but I want to go back to your brother just for a quick moment because I think it resonates with a number of your listeners, a number of your audience. And that is that I think we need to start at least introducing individuals like your brother to these timelines and let them know that there are many researchers that truly believe that we're not gonna have a world here, it's not gonna look anywhere near the same as what we have now even just by the year 2040 to 2050. And I think that not only world hunger, but start looking at who you have in your own family. They're not gonna have the same world that we have, and the largest part of that is what we're doing to the planet. And then he just needs to know that all these very simple -- like a snapshot of the earth and how much we're using for animal agriculture, and he should come around.

Now, about the world hunger, yes. The best way to describe that is that world hunger is very complicated as you know. It cycles back through poverty, and we want to combine this with the fact, what I just mentioned, there's predicted to be about 9.6 billion people expected to inhabit earth by the year 2050. And knowing that we have just under a billion people that

are hungry right now with about 6 million children dying from starvation each year, what we choose to eat in the United States, and what we choose to eat in other developed countries, is driving the resource use in other countries. For instance, we're running out of land here. They're running out of land in China, and Europe certainly is running out of land. And what's happening is that when we're choosing to eat animals we're essentially driving or fueling the demand on a global basis for that product to be produced. And it's going to be produced, so we're actually creating a couple of problems. One is that we're establishing food prices and availability issues and policymaking in other countries, because if we all ate plant based foods and non-GMO type of seeding, we would end up creating influences through availability, policymaking, and pricing into developing countries. The second issue is that we're running out of resources, and most of the resources that large conglomerates, multinationals, feel that they're going to exploit are in developing countries. And so there are numerous examples of this I can give you at some point in time about how funding is being applied toward moving the already created demand for animal agriculture into the next 10-20 years down the road by exploiting developing countries and creating more land, operating more land for livestock and also producing crops to feed them. So every bit of our choice making here in the United States unequivocally affects the global demand and impetus towards continued resource abuse and abuse of livestock.

JASMIN: Wow, it's just unbelievable. There are so many more questions we have for you, Dr. Oppenlander, but I want to make sure to save a few for when you come back because I hope that you come back and join us again on Our Hen House.

DR. OPPENLANDER: I will. It'd be great. It'd be my privilege really to do that.

JASMIN: Just tell me finally as a final word, I hear you, in addition to everything you're doing and in all of your copious free time, you run a small animal sanctuary, is that right?

DR. OPPENLANDER: Yeah, we do. We just felt that there was such a need to help distressed farmed animals. We do also some wild animals as well. So we do what we can. But yeah, so we have a small operation. I basically have to give all of the credit to that -- I mean, I'm there in support in a number of ways, but my wife Jill is actually the major caretaker. And she's just an incredible person, over the years for somewhere around 40 years she's been doing this. And she's just saved so many lives and has been such a best friend to so many different little animal family members that is just a really amazing thing to see.

JASMIN: Wow, that's incredible. And our listeners can learn more at [inspireawarenessnow.org](http://inspireawarenessnow.org) and of course your brand new book, *Food Choice and Sustainability: Why Buying Local, Eating Less Meat, and Taking Baby Steps Won't Work*. And I think that this is going to somehow find its way to my brother.

DR. OPPENLANDER: Hope so.

JASMIN: And I so appreciate everything that you are doing in this world. I wish there were more people like you, but hopefully there will be after your influence. So thank you for joining us today on Our Hen House and we look forward to talking to you soon.

DR. OPPENLANDER: Well, thank you very much. As I said it's been an honor to be here and thanks so much for the kind words. And don't worry, your brother will change.

JASMIN: Famous last words. Okay, thanks.