

Earth's Kitchen







Dedicated to

My dear brother and best friend, Arrush,
whose memories continue to inspire me every day.

Preface

In 2024, we're facing big challenges like climate change and the urgent need for holistic living. This thesis explores how our food choices, the environment, and our health are all connected. It's driven by a strong desire to protect our planet and the belief that each of us can make a difference.

This project started with a personal realization of how our actions affect the world. From there, I've been on a journey to find ways to create positive change. Through research, working with communities, and talking to stakeholders, I've learned about the challenges and opportunities of moving towards a plant-based diet.

This thesis aims to share what I've discovered and offer tools to help others make more sustainable choices. By working together, we can create a better future for everyone and the planet. I hope this work inspires others to join in and take steps towards a healthier, more climate-friendly diet and lifestyle.

With gratitude,

Madhuri Rao

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Roots of Conscious Living

A Personal Journey

My first exposure to sustainability, conscious living, and slow living came from spending my summers at my grandparents' home in Malpe, a small beach town in Karnataka, India. The life was very local, simplistic and rooted in community, those summers were filled with cherished memories of traditional meals, laughter, and deep conversations. Most of the food we enjoyed came from their backyard or the local farmers' market. They practiced composting, recycling, and believed in zero waste principles. Rainwater harvesting and drinking from the well were commonplace. I credit my love and connection to animals and nature to them.

My background spans graphic design, law, yoga, and entrepreneurship. Throughout these experiences, I've maintained a consistent passion for environmentalism. My belief in yogic principles, particularly non-violence and compassion, has guided my values of self-discipline and empathy. In yoga, we focus on conscious breathing, and consciousness in every aspect of life.

Through my thesis project, I aim to explore an often-overlooked intersection: the connection between animal agriculture and climate change. Initial research has led me to investigate the nexus of public health, the environment, behavioral change, and community development.

“An understanding of the natural world and what's in it is a source of not only a great curiosity, but great fulfillment.”

-David Attenborough

I used to rescue and foster cats and dogs, believing I was advocating for the voiceless in society. Then, one day, a friend of mine decided to go vegan and began sharing resources with me. We had discussions about it, and though I supported her, I wasn't ready to make the change myself. However, after a couple of months, I faced my own double standard. I realized that wanting to rescue some animals while contributing to the exploitation of others didn't align with my values and inner compass. Aware of the atrocities inflicted on voiceless animals for human benefit—our taste buds and enjoyment—I couldn't continue living the same way.

I made the decision to eliminate all animal products from my diet and lifestyle. Initially challenging, it was also exciting, like learning how to ride a bike or swim for the first time. Breaking this news to my family, friends, and colleagues wasn't easy, as their reactions weren't always supportive. I quickly realized that my personal decision made others feel questioned and uncomfortable.

Nevertheless, I felt healthier, spiritually liberated, empowered, and guilt-free. Even when we're not consciously thinking about our actions, our subconscious is constantly aware. Adopting a plant-based diet has had a positive impact on me and my family, and I want to share that with others.



Fossil Fuels, Animal Agriculture, and Food Systems

Crisis Call: Fossil Fuels and Food Systems

There is a climate, ocean and biodiversity crisis. Fossil fuels and animal agriculture are the driving force behind runaway global warming as well as extensive biodiversity loss, large-scale deforestation, species extinction, water depletion, soil degradation and ocean dead zones. Addressing fossil fuels alone is not enough; we need action on food systems too.

Addressing Greenhouse Gases and the Impact of Animal Agriculture

The three main greenhouse gases-carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide are at record levels and rapidly accelerating; animal agriculture contributes to all three but is the main driver of methane and nitrous oxide emissions globally.

Animal agriculture is driving Indigenous land theft in the Amazon; subjecting racially and ethnically marginalized communities to disproportionate amounts of toxic waste from factory farms and slaughterhouses as well as exposing workers to toxic chemicals, hazardous working conditions and severe trauma.

Scientists warned in the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), sixth assessment that we need to cut methane or face collapse. Lead reviewer Durwood Zaelke said methane reductions were probably the only way of preventing temperature rises of 1.5C above pre-industrial levels, otherwise extreme weather will increase and several planetary tipping points could be triggered, from which there is no coming back. Zaelke points out that “cutting methane is the biggest opportunity to slow warming between now and 2040. We need to face this emergency.”¹

In short, the three greenhouse gases must be tackled both urgently and with equal measure. Plant-based and soft energy solutions that can mitigate this disaster are within our grasp — we just need to implement them.

Food for Thought: The Impact of Dietary Choices on Health and the Environment

What we eat greatly influences our personal health and the environment we all share. Transitioning toward more plant-based diets that are in line with standard dietary guidelines could reduce global mortality by 6–10% and food-related greenhouse gas emissions by 29–70% compared with a reference scenario in 2050.²

The food system is responsible for more than a quarter of all greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, of which up to 80% are associated with livestock production.³

Food systems exist at different scales: global, regional, national and local. Local food systems around the world are very diverse and location specific. They share some key features, but any attempt to change them should reflect their uniqueness resulting from traditions, cultures, economic structures and ecologies of locations. Change in food systems comes about through external and internal drivers, as well as through feedback mechanisms between these drivers.⁴

“The intensive farming of billions of animals globally seriously damages the environment, causing loss of biodiversity and producing massive greenhouse gas emissions that accelerate global warming.

The inhumane crowded conditions not only cause intense suffering to sentient beings but enable the transfer of pathogens from animal to human risking new zoonotic diseases. On ethical grounds it should be phased out as soon as possible.”

–Dr. Jane Goodall,

DBE, Founder of Jane Goodall Institute and the Roots & Shoots Programme & UN Messenger of Peace

Climate Activism

Shifting Perceptions: Climate Activism in the Media Age

Until a few years ago, discussions on climate change and the detrimental impact of fossil fuels were confined to a select group of environmentalists advocating for a transition away from them. Today, the landscape has transformed, with a surge in activism led by Millennials and Generation Z. From protests to online campaigns, young activists are at the forefront of demanding urgent action on climate change.

However, despite their efforts, the media often portrays these activists in a negative light, depicting them as aggressive and resorting to unlawful approaches to compel change from people, corporations, and governments. This portrayal not only undermines the validity of their cause but also perpetuates misconceptions about the nature of climate activism in the modern age.

Youth Climate Activism

Swedish activist Greta Thunberg's solitary protest outside her school has evolved into Fridays for Future, a worldwide school strike movement involving millions. In 2019, she made headlines by sailing across the Atlantic to attend the UN climate conference.

Originally filed in 2015, Juliana v. United States was brought before a district court in Oregon by a group of plaintiffs—between the ages 8 and 19, at the time—who alleged that the federal government has knowingly violated their constitutional rights by promoting the export and production of fossil fuels that contribute to climate change.

Now almost nine years later, these individuals may never see their day in court. On May 1, 2024, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ordered a lower court judge to dismiss the lawsuit, finding that the U.S. judiciary lacked the power to provide the remedies sought by the plaintiffs⁵.

Similarly, on December 10, 2023, 18 children from across the state of California, ranging from ages 8 to 17, filed their constitutional climate lawsuit Genesis B. v. United States Environmental Protection Agency against the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)⁶. This lawsuit is part of a broader trend of climate -related cases initiated by children worldwide.



Twelve of the 18 young climate activists behind the Genesis B. v. EPA lawsuit.



Youth activists protested ahead of the Climate Ambition Summit in New York City in September.

Navigating Climate Solutions

The Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement, established in 2015, stands as a beacon of global cooperation in the face of climate change's existential threat. With ambitious targets to limit global warming, including the goal to cap temperature rise at 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, the agreement signifies an unprecedented commitment by nations worldwide. However, achieving these targets necessitates not only governmental action but also grassroots initiatives that drive meaningful change at the community level.

The Paris Climate Agreement is silent on animal agriculture, despite it being a critical contributor to global warming and an essential part of meeting climate goals. As the independent policy institute Chatham House observed in their 2014 report, 'shifting global demand for meat and dairy produce is central to achieving climate goals.' This position is strongly supported by scientists around the world, including Oxford University researcher Michael Clark, who points out that 'even if fossil fuel emissions stop immediately, emissions from our food systems alone could increase global temperatures by more than 1.5°C⁷.

While the Paris Agreement marks a significant milestone in global efforts to combat climate change, addressing the impact of animal agriculture remains a crucial yet overlooked aspect. Grassroots initiatives and policy interventions targeting food systems are essential for achieving the ambitious climate goals set forth in the agreement.



Environmental Impacts of Food

Agriculture has a significant environmental impact in three key ways. First, it requires large amounts of fresh water, which can cause significant environmental pressures in regions with water stress. It needs water as input and pollutes rivers, lakes, and oceans by releasing nutrients. It is a crucial driver of climate change, responsible for around one-quarter of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, agriculture has a massive impact on the world's environment due to its enormous land use. Half of the world's habitable land is used for agriculture. Large parts of the world that were once covered by forests and wild lands are now used for agriculture. This loss of natural habitat has been the main driver for reducing the world's biodiversity.⁸



94% Global mammal biomass (excl humans) is livestock

Beef- 99.48 kg



CO₂ GHG emission

Nuts- 0.43 kg



78% Global ocean and fresh water pollution



71% Global bird biomass is poultry livestock



50% World's habitable land is used for agriculture

Livestock overwhelmingly contributes to greenhouse emissions

When comparing the greenhouse gas emissions per kilogram of food product, it becomes evident that animal-based items such as beef, lamb, and cheese have the highest environmental impact. These foods typically require significant resources in their production, including land, water, and feed for livestock, leading to higher emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) like methane and carbon dioxide⁹.

On the other hand, plant-based options like nuts, potatoes, and bananas demonstrate much lower environmental impact in terms of emissions. Plants generally require fewer resources to grow compared to raising livestock for meat and dairy production. Additionally, plants often have shorter growth cycles and can be cultivated more efficiently, resulting in reduced emissions associated with food production.



26% GHG emissions come from food

“Sustainable agriculture is not just about growing crops, it’s about caring for the soil, the water, the air, and all the living things that depend on them.”

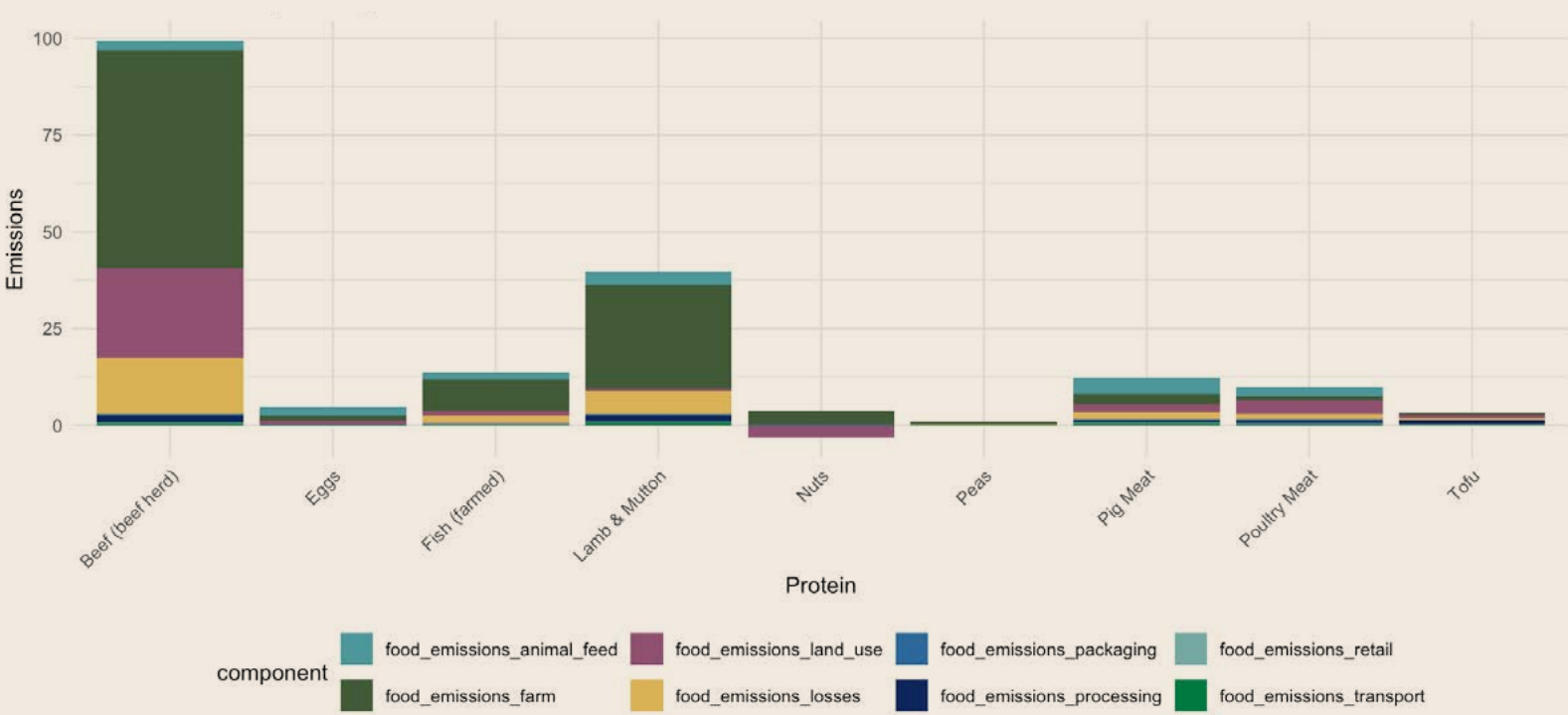
- **Vandana Shiva**
Indian Scholar, Environmental Activist, Food Sovereignty Advocate, Eco-Feminist

Environmental Impacts of Food

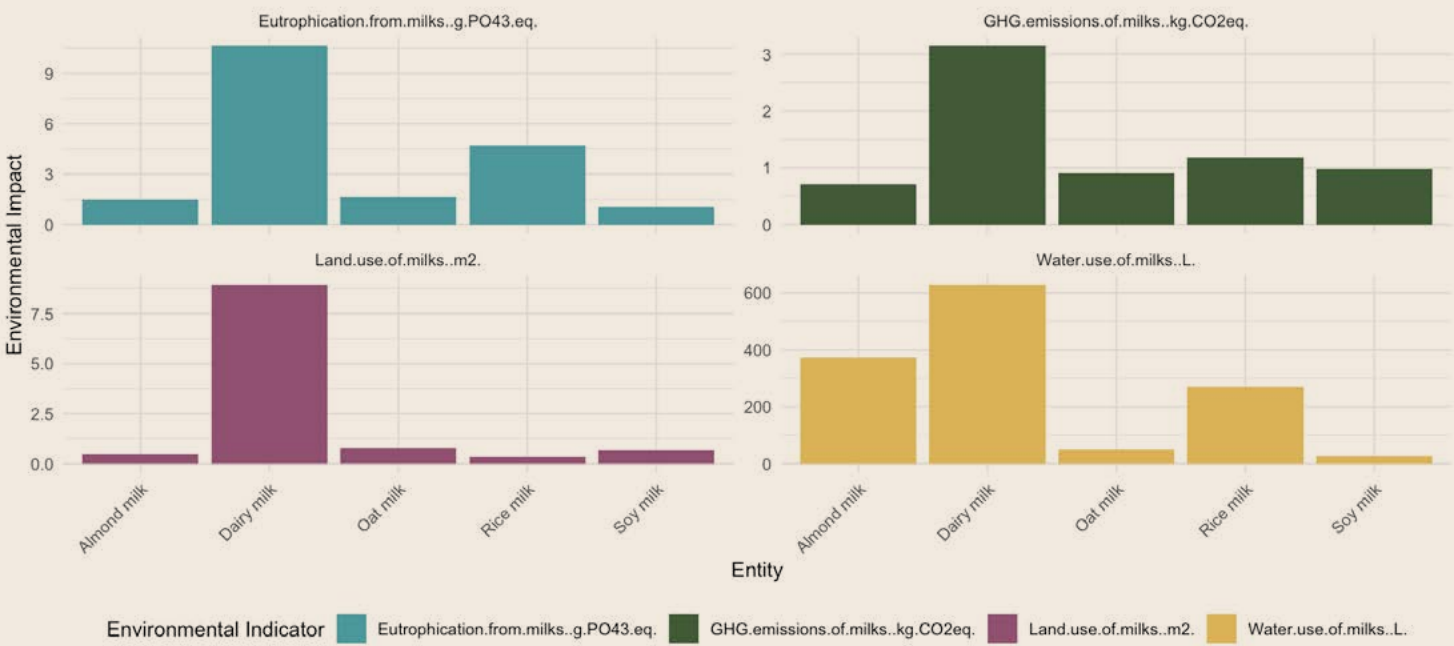
Greenhouse gas emissions across the supply chain for type of protein source

Animal-based proteins like beef and lamb are associated with substantial greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, stemming from farm practices, processing, and transportation¹⁰. Moreover, these proteins often necessitate extensive land use, particularly evident in beef production, which can contribute to deforestation and habitat degradation. Plant-based proteins like peas, tofu and nuts demonstrate minimal emissions throughout the supply chain, with nuts even exhibiting carbon-positive attributes due to their capacity to sequester carbon. It’s important to note that while eggs have relatively low emissions but their production still requires animal feed, concerns of animal welfare and bird flu.

Greenhouse gas emissions per kilogram of Protein



Environmental Footprint of selected types of milk



Greenhouse gas emissions of selected food oils across the supply chain

The data compares the environmental footprint of different milk types: almond, dairy, oat, rice, and soy milk. Dairy milk stands out with the highest land use and water consumption. Almond milk shows lower land use but higher greenhouse gas emissions. Soy milk has the lowest overall environmental impact. Almond trees lock up a lot of CO₂ as they grow. However, they require the most water to produce the plant based milks. Soy milk uses the least water with only slightly higher emissions. Oat and rice milk fall between almond and soy milk in terms of environmental impact. Oat milk has relatively low land use and water consumption, while rice milk shows moderate values across all metrics associated with food production.

“A vegan diet is probably the single biggest way to reduce your impact on planet Earth.”

- Joseph Poore,
Director, Oxford Martin Programme
on Food Sustainability

“Sustainable diets are healthy dietary patterns that aim to promote optimal health and wellbeing and have minimal environmental pressure and impact. Sustainable healthy diets are equitable, affordable, accessible and culturally acceptable.”¹¹

-Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and World Health



Image: Oleg Malshakov - stock.adobe.com

Navigating the Ecosystem

Analyzing how climate impacts communities

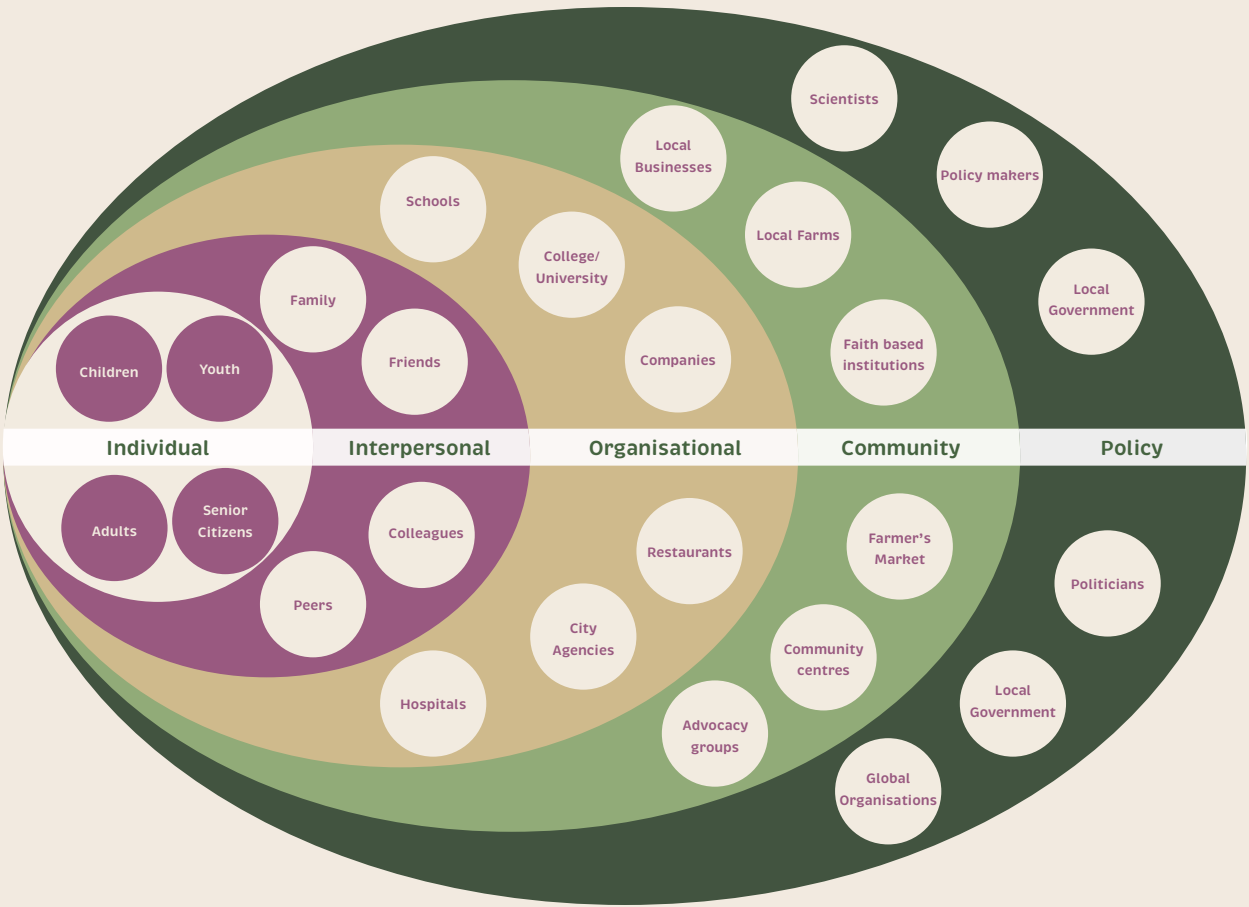
Climate change impacts everyone, some more severely than others. Each of us possesses knowledge and skills that can contribute to climate action. The plant-based movement reflects this intergenerational collaboration, as evidenced by the diverse age groups converging at plant-based meetings to raise awareness and expand outreach efforts. Children, youth, and marginalized populations are among the most severely impacted by climate change due to their increased vulnerability. Evidence confirms that children and youth experience eco-anxiety in reaction to awareness of climate change.

Youth from vulnerable communities, like Indigenous communities, or those who have strong ties to the land are often identified as being emotionally impacted by climate change¹². We need to support and empower the youth to improve their relationship with the planet, food and themselves and contribute to climate action.

Diverse Adoption of Plant-Based Lifestyles

Wakefield Research surveyed 1,000 U.S. adults where more than one-third expressed some interest in adopting a vegan lifestyle. The survey shows that some generations appear more eager to embrace plant-based food like Millennials (81%) are more likely than Gen Z (68%). Gen X (67%) and Boomers (57%). People choose to go plant based for various reasons like personal health, animal welfare, and mitigating the meat industry’s impact on the environment. 15% of American consumers are currently flexitarian¹³.

Even though plant-based lifestyles are perceived as most closely associated with white behavior, the data tells a different story. Danone North America surveyed 4,000 adults and found that 55% of Black Americans, 61% of Hispanic/Latino Americans, and 71% of Asian Americans were likely to swap animal products for plant-based products, compared to the national average of 49%. Although people from these groups may not identify as strictly vegan, they are shaping consumer trends toward plant-based eating¹⁴.



Ecosystem Map-Analyzing how climate impacts communities

Climate change impacts communities at various levels, from individuals to organizations and policymakers. At the individual level, people can take action by adopting sustainable practices in their daily lives, such as reducing energy consumption, opting for sustainable transportation options, and making environmentally conscious choices regarding food and consumption habits. These individual actions, when multiplied across entire communities, can contribute significantly to reducing carbon emissions and mitigating the effects of climate change.

Organizations, including businesses, educational institutions, and community groups, also play a critical role in addressing climate change. They can implement sustainability initiatives, adopt renewable energy sources, and promote eco-friendly practices within their operations. Additionally, organizations can advocate for policy changes at local, national, and international levels to support climate action and create a more sustainable future. By mobilizing resources and leveraging their influence, organizations can contribute to building resilient communities and mitigating the impacts of climate change for current and future generations.

Community Partnership



Collaboration with Plant Based Treaty (PBT)

The Plant Based Treaty initiative is a grassroots campaign aimed at prioritizing food systems in the fight against the climate crisis. Its mission is to advocate for a transition towards healthier, sustainable plant-based diets.

The initiative encourages individuals, institutions, cities, and national governments to endorse the treaty, signaling their commitment to responding to the climate emergency with a global Plant Based Treaty. This global movement seeks to catalyze collective action towards a more sustainable and environmentally conscious food system. I have been working closely with Plant based Treaty since summer of 2023.

Dr. Anita Krajnc, Co-founder of Toronto Pig save and the Executive Director of the Animal Save Movement and the Global Campaign Coordinator for PBT and Ellen Dent, Co-founder and Executive Director of the Animal Alliance and Campaigner for the PBT have been my main point of contact.

I have been part of the Friday weekly calls, where we brainstorm ideas, share updates and have introductory calls for the new members of the Plant Based Treaty.

They have been supportive and guided me through this process. The fundamental principals and goals laid by PBT have been the main pillars of this project. My primary goal with PBT, was to understand the barriers they face in getting individuals and organizations to endorse the treaty and to co-design pathways to empower stakeholders to transition to a plant based diet. The goal is to create a road map that includes key tools and resources for how to conduct workshops, out reach events to get stakeholders to join the movement and spread the awareness.



Image: Dr. Anita Krajnc (Left), Ellen Dent (Right)

Why Plant Based Treaty?

Their mission is to promote a shift towards a just, plant-based food system that would enable us to live safely within our planetary boundaries and reforest the Earth. Individuals, groups, businesses and cities that endorse the Plant Based Treaty are expressing their support for national governments to come together to negotiate a global Plant Based Treaty, including the three core principles and 40 proposals.

Demand 1 | Relinquish

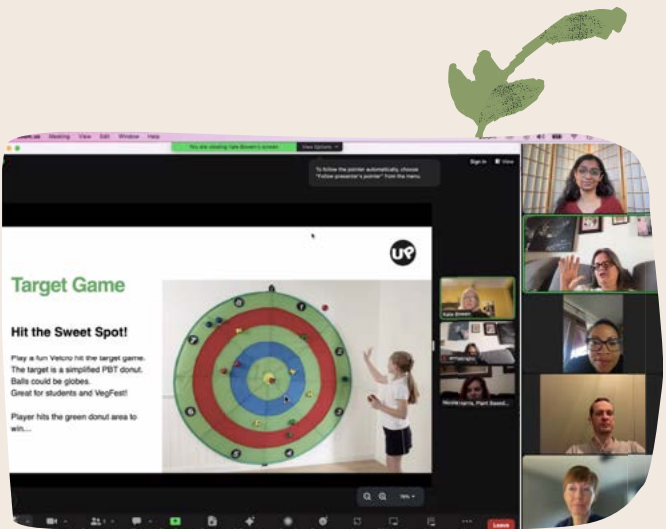
- Cease exacerbating the issue.
- No land use change, including deforestation, for animal agriculture.

Demand 2 | Redirect

- Eliminate the driving forces behind the problem.
- Promote plant-based foods and actively transition away from animal-based food systems to plant-based systems.

Demand 3 | Restore

- Actively heal the problem while building resilience and mitigating climate change.
- Restore key ecosystems and reforest the earth.



Project Values

The core values drive this thesis project and inform its approach, ensuring a comprehensive and holistic perspective for impactful outcomes.



Holistic

Embracing a comprehensive approach that considers the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic factors.

Curiosity

Fostering a spirit of exploration and open-mindedness to try new approaches, diet and ways of life.

Hopeful

Maintaining an optimistic outlook and belief in the potential for positive change, even in the face of challenges.

Joy

Infusing positivity and enthusiasm into every step of the project, fostering engagement and empowerment with the stakeholders.

Community

Cultivating a sense of belonging and collaboration, recognizing the strength of collective action to make a positive change.

Encouraging

Providing support, motivation, and inspiration to individuals and communities on their journey towards a plant-forward and climate-smart diet.



Research Methodology

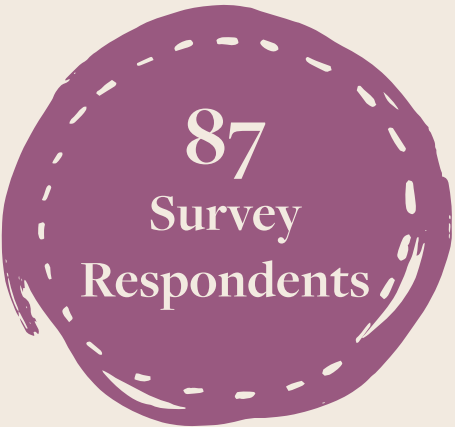




Connecting with Community

My personal research journey involved volunteering at a farm sanctuary, participating in animal liberation marches, and attending vegan festivals. These experiences provided valuable insights into the interconnectedness of animal welfare, climate justice, and food systems. Engaging with diverse perspectives, I observed a growing community of individuals passionate about adopting plant-based lifestyles, promoting inclusivity, and advocating for sustainable alternatives.

These firsthand experiences enriched my understanding of the complexities surrounding food choices and reinforced the importance of promoting sustainable and ethical practices within our food systems. Conducting one-on-one interviews with experts, activists and stakeholders across different demographics, I aimed to capture a holistic view of the landscape.

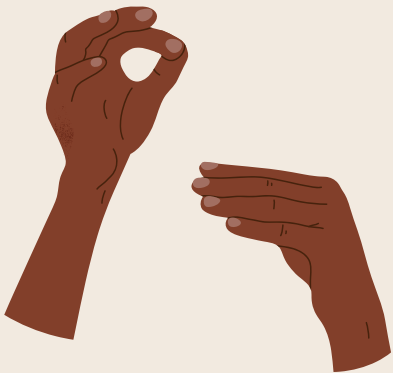


Connecting with Community

After my interview with Genesis Butler from Youth Climate Save, I had a realization. While my initial focus was on supporting and empowering the youth, I understood that addressing this complex issue requires involvement from all stakeholders, including adults. To effectively tackle this challenge, we need collective action and commitment from individuals of all ages to care and take meaningful steps towards a sustainable future.



Image: Genesis Butler



“We need adults to not just support the youth in the climate save movement but to also show up actively at protests, rallies, post on social media, write to their city mayors, educate their families.”

-Genesis Butler
Environmental and Animal Rights Activist, Youth Climate Save

Qualitative data analysis

I have conducted multiple surveys to collect data on dietary preferences, cultural food practices, and perceptions of climate change, that have guided my strategies and approaches. These surveys served as a foundational tool in shaping and designing the prototypes. Through this analysis, we identified several influencers, including family, friends, and cultural backgrounds, particularly among Millennials and Gen Z, who exhibited receptiveness to plant-based diets.

Survey 1 was conducted using Typeform, it was digital to make it accessible, and avoid the usage of paper. This qualitative survey which enquired questions like:

1. Who has influenced your dietary choices the most?
2. What cultural, ethnic or regional food traditions did you grow up with?
3. What influences your dietary choices?
4. How would you describe your dietary preferences?
5. Are you aware of the environmental impact of animal agriculture and its contribution to climate change?
6. Have you ever made dietary changes with the environment in mind? If yes, how has your relationship with food evolved?

Focused on exploring early influences, personal relationships with food, cultural values, and the significance of sharing culture in shaping participants' dietary preferences and choices with a sample size of 20 and age range of 22-46 years, the findings revealed that family members exert a significant influence on eating habits, indicating the enduring impact of childhood experiences on dietary choices. Participants also emphasized the importance of their relationship with food, recognizing its impact on overall health and well-being.

Cultural backgrounds and traditions were identified as key influencers, highlighting the diverse cultural influences on dietary preferences. Furthermore, engaging in conversations around food was found to foster inclusivity and appreciation for diverse culinary traditions, contributing to knowledge sharing and understanding of dietary choices.

Overall, Survey 1 aimed to gather insights on various aspects of participants' dietary preferences, familiarity with climate change issues, and considerations affecting their decision to adopt a plant-based diet.



Community impact on plant-based living - key quotes:

“My former roommate who is vegan and my friends at work who stopped eating animal products.”

“I went vegan 7 years ago and I was influenced with punk music and my first boyfriend who was vegan.”

Flexitarians key quotes on plant-based diet adoption:

“Need increase in access to recipes and alternatives.”

“Empowering myself by learning about the importance of consuming plant based.”

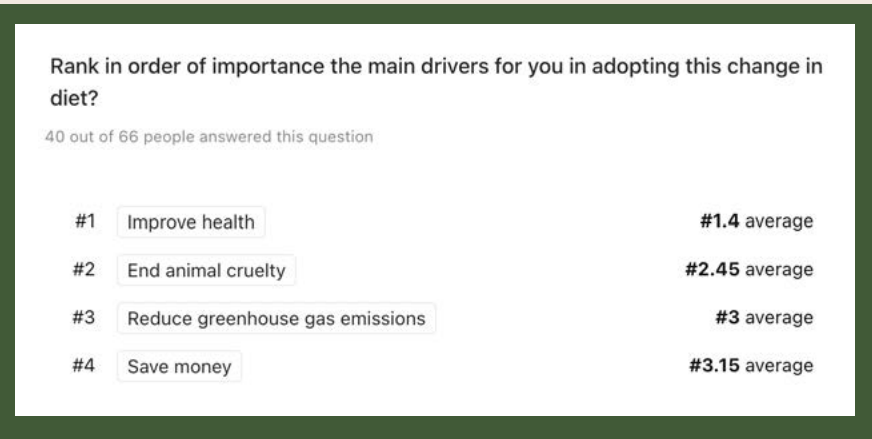
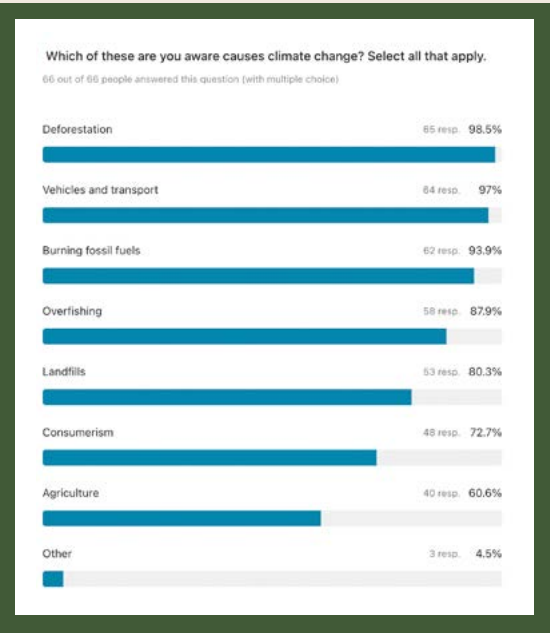
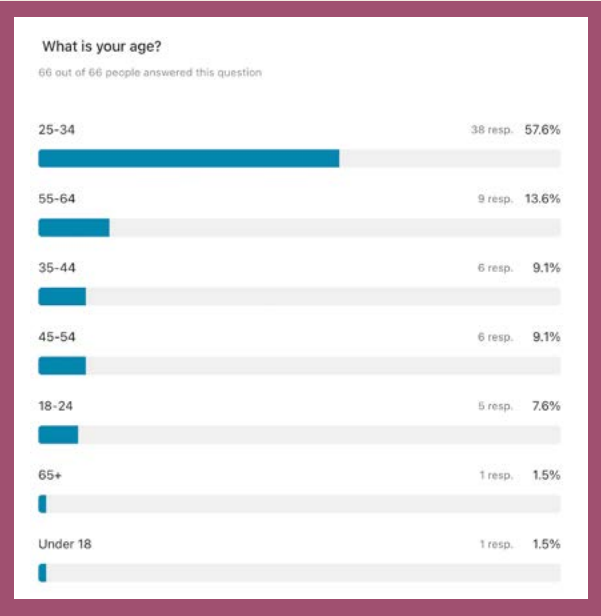
Quantitative data analysis

Survey 2, was conducted using Typeform with a sample size of 66 and age range of 17-70 years, from USA, India, Europe and UK. They helped identify barriers to adopting a plant-based diet included high costs, lack of cooking skills, taste preferences, and unfamiliarity with plant- based options. Conversely, motivators for individuals considering a plant-based diet included taste and personal health benefits, animal welfare and environmental impact.

To instill confidence in adopting such a diet, strategies focused on highlighting positive health improvements, providing access to information, and fostering community support.

Moreover, the participants recommended implementing default plant-based options in various settings such as schools, hospitals, conferences, and festivals to enhance accessibility and inclusivity. It also recognized preventing factors such as lack of nutritional information, a preference for animal products, limited plant-based options, and perceived expense as significant obstacles to adoption.

The surveys also emphasized the influential role of supportive communities in facilitating individuals’ experiences and adherence to a plant-based diet. Survey 2 delved deeper into the perspectives of individuals who have embraced a vegan diet, examining the impact of community support and exposure to plant-based lifestyles, as well as the barriers faced by flexitarians. This comprehensive approach aimed to better understand the needs and concerns of individuals regarding the adoption of plant-based diets.



Earth’s Kitchen

This thesis delves into the interconnected realms of food habits, climate change awareness, and the development of effective strategies to promote plant-based diets.

Hello!
I am Madhuri, an MFA Design for Social Innovation candidate at the School of Visual Arts. I am conducting academic research to better understand people’s food habits, awareness of climate change, and preferences for plant-based diet. Your valuable insights can contribute significantly to the understanding of these interconnected factors.

The information gathered will aid in my thesis project, Earth’s Kitchen, which aims to develop strategies to promote plant based diets to mitigate climate change. The survey will cover a range of topics, including your current diet preferences, level of familiarity with climate change issues, and any experiences or considerations that may impact your decision to adopt a plant-based diet.

Rest assured that your responses will be kept confidential, and the data collected will be used solely for research purposes. Your input is invaluable, and I appreciate your time and willingness to contribute to this study.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to reach out to me at mrao4asva.edu.
Thank you! :)

Design Probes

This was an initial activity aimed to delve into participants' preferences for plant-based options, cultural influences on food choices, emphasis on sustainability practices, and the shift towards plant-based alternatives in their diets, co-facilitated with my classmate, Jenny as a follow up/reflective activity after a Global Guest Lecture Series with Zaccarius Gonzales, an artist, chef and curator. DSI students engaged in an interactive activity where they designed the contents of their ideal grocery store, providing further insights into food trends, barriers, preferences, and community perspectives without limitations of affordability, accessibility, availability, or time constraints.

Using this design probe, we facilitated a group discussion on participants' shopping habits, grocery store visions, climate impact considerations, and community involvement, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of food-related decisions and cultural influences.

The findings revealed a growing inclination towards sustainable food culture, as evidenced by participants' preferences for plant-based alternatives and their awareness of environmental issues. **Cultural values played a significant role in shaping food choices, highlighting the importance of cultural influences in dietary decisions.** Practices like sliding scale, excess drop off, and community fridges indicated a collective environmental awareness among participants.

Additionally, the post activity survey indicated a noticeable shift towards healthier and sustainable options, with lower rankings for meat, poultry, seafood, and dairy products. **The alignment of cultural values and sustainability efforts was evident through the overlapping of plant-based and cultural foods, signifying harmony between cultural traditions and sustainability initiatives.**





Thesis Statement

To mitigate climate change and address critical food system challenges by empowering NYC residents with skills to promote consciousness around food and foster intergenerational transition to a plant based diet through optimizing community networks and knowledge sharing of holistic practices.

How might we **empower NYC residents to embrace a plant-based diet and actively participate in climate change mitigation through community engagement and resource sharing?**



Prototyping

Plant-based Thanksgiving Dinner

Inspired by a Friends-giving dinner at DSI, I co-hosted a potluck where everyone was asked to cook or bring something plant-based. The goal was to create a delicious Thanksgiving meal. While some of the dishes were plant based versions of traditional dishes along with dishes from different cultures as well. It was an inclusive meal while fostering meaningful conversations around food, sustainability, and community.

Throughout the meal, conversations flowed freely, fueled by curiosity and a shared appreciation for plant-based cuisine. Guests exchanged tips and recipes, sharing their experiences and insights into incorporating more plant-based options into their diets.

The evening began with each guest arriving with their plant-based dish, ranging from hearty mains to delectable desserts. As we gathered around the table, there was a sense of excitement and anticipation, eager to sample the diverse array of dishes prepared.



Hypothesis

If traditional holiday dinners were made plant-based, it would demystify plant based cooking and encourage inclusive and plant-based celebrations.

Insights

The hypothesis was confirmed as guests loved the process of making plant based dishes and showed interest in trying more plant-based options in daily lives.

This dinner gathering was extravagant and the onus was on the hosts and not all guests had the opportunity to cook.

Intentional Cooking Workshop

The immersive cooking workshop aimed to bring people together and change the misconception that plant-based pizza is limited in choices. Held in India, the event welcomed friends and acquaintances to a ‘make-your-own pizza’ night. Participants were provided with prepared dough and an array of plant-based toppings, with a demonstration on pizza-making techniques.

The atmosphere was filled with curiosity and excitement as everyone eagerly crafted their own pizzas. The diverse range of toppings encouraged creativity and exploration, challenging the notion that plant-based eating is restrictive. Together, participants enjoyed their creations, tasting each other’s pizzas and sharing in the communal experience.

By the end of the workshop, participants not only savored delicious plant-based pizzas but also gained new culinary skills and knowledge about plant-based alternatives. Feedback revealed a willingness to repeat the experience, highlighting the success of the workshop in fostering enthusiasm for plant-based cooking.



Image: Participants at the ‘Make-your-own pizza’ night Workshop.



Hypothesis

Providing cooking workshops will lead to a belief that plant-based cooking offers boundless possibilities and can be enjoyable.

Insights

Participants enjoyed crafting their own pizzas and eating them together while discussing their experiences with plant-based diets. However, some found the process time-consuming for regular practice.



Scraps to DYE for Workshop

An immersive learning experience to create a sense of community, generate dialogues to encourage climate conscious stewardship. This Natural dye workshop in collaboration with Mari Nakano, DSI Designer in Residence for Spring’24, we made dye from plants, and demonstrated how to dye fabric for the altar around food and conscious living.

The goal of the Natural Dye workshop was to empower participants in addressing climate change through their dietary choices while raising awareness of the link between food choices and climate action.

By using plant and food-derived colors to dye fabric for the DSI community altar, the workshop fostered discussions on circularity, sustainability, and the connections between food and climate. Participants gained insights into sustainable food practices and the environmental impact of their dietary choices. Additionally, they received materials on climate-smart diets and enjoyed food made from the same ingredients used for dyeing, highlighting the creative and nourishing power of plants.

Through this immersive learning environment, the workshop aimed to increase participants’ understanding of plant-based and climate-smart diets, while promoting holistic food consumption and community engagement.



Image: Participants at the Natural Dye Workshop.



Image: Mari Nakano during the Natural Dye Workshop (Left), Madhuri demonstrating at the workshop (Right).



Scraps to DYE for workshop

Participants engaged in a reflective activity inspired by Ayana Elizabeth Johnson’s Climate Action Venn Diagram, empowering them to contemplate their capacity to address climate change through their dietary choices following the dye workshop. By asking participants what climate action they can take and asking them to reflect lead to interesting insights that most preferred home cooked, natural, food associated with their culture or others, wholesome meals. They leveraged their cooking skills, intuitively, responsibly, inventively, reducing consumption. Opportunity to bridge the gap, by creating awareness and highlighting skills already exist, helping them connect the dots, make it more fun and easy.



Image: Plant-based food and resources at the workshop.

Hypothesis

Providing immersive learning experiences and reflective activities on climate change will generate ideas.

Insights

Participants immersed themselves in the dyeing activity, embraced being the present, slowness, plant based food. It made it easier to talk about climate change and left feeling positive.



Image: A workshop participant with their dyed fabric.



Inspired by Ayana Elizabeth Johnson’s TED Talk and Venn Diagram on Climate Action.

Image: A participant’s Venn diagram from the reflective activity.

Power of Potluck

The Plant-Based DSI Cultural Potluck event, catering to participants aged 22-46, was a collaborative effort with Jenny and Avery, within the DSI community aimed at fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation for plant-based and cultural diet. Participants came together where they not only shared delicious plant-based dishes from their respective cultures but also engaged in discussions and activities followed by a talk by Global Guest Lecture Speaker, Mari Nakano on food justice, circular systems, and emergent practices.

One of the key components of the event was the distribution of a plant-based starter kit to help prepare for the potluck, which contained essential resources such as a culturally relevant grocery list, nutritional sources, and culturally diverse recipes.

This kit served as a practical tool to support individuals in confidently transitioning to a plant-based diet, aligning with their cultural identities and environmental consciousness. It was based on the vegan starter kit by Plant Based Treaty, that I reworked to make the language and content more inclusive to different cultures and welcoming.

Through the Plant-based Cultural Potluck, the goal was not only to provide resources but also to raise awareness about the importance of plant-based diets in mitigating climate change and promoting holistic well-being. By fostering inclusive, cultural diverse, and participatory, the event served as a platform to inspire individuals to embrace plant-based eating practices as a sustainable lifestyle choice.

Hypothesis

Providing plant based starter kit and resources will empower participants to cook for the potluck.

Insights

Participants found the resources helpful, adding cultural aspect made it easier and exciting to cook plant based versions to the potluck to share with everyone.



Image: DSI community at the potluck.



Image: Plant-based starter kit shared with the DSI community.



Image: DSI community participating in the recipe activity.



Image: Recipes shared by the DSI community.



Image: DSI community at the potluck.



Primary objectives

Earth's Kitchen aims to bridge the gap between the current complexities of food systems and the vision of a hopeful future where diets nourish both our bodies and the planet. By raising awareness, fostering connections, and empowering individuals, the project seeks to facilitate meaningful behavior changes towards a climate-smart future. Together, it aspires to cultivate a community committed to nurturing both ourselves and the planet for generations to come.

The objective of Earth's Kitchen is to understand and address the barriers and challenges individuals face in transitioning to a plant-based diet, while providing support, encouragement, and resources to make the process inclusive, easy, and exciting. The goal is to foster a larger sense of purpose and community by promoting empathy for each other and the planet. It aims to redefine the concept of a kitchen as a place where we cook with love, use resources from the Earth without harming it, and practice respect and mindfulness. Through Earth's Kitchen, it strives to cultivate mutual love and respect between humans and the planet, thereby creating a sustainable and harmonious relationship with our environment.

Philosophy

Earth's Kitchen aims to redefine the concept of a kitchen as a place where we cook with love, use resources from the Earth without harming it or any living beings in the process, and practice respect and mindfulness.



Image: Oleg Malshakov - stock.adobe.com

Intervention

Changing dietary behavior for various reasons can be challenging and typical approaches can show limited success. The current intervention development involves a mixture of qualitative research like workshops, surveys, interviews and using social cognitive theory and the trans-theoretical model. The key social cognitive theory construct of reciprocal determinism means that a person can be both an agent for change and a responder to change. Thus, changes in the environment, the examples of role models, and reinforcements can be used to promote healthier behavior.¹⁵

When using this model of change, “changers” are not coerced, but rather supported and accepted at the stage they present. Treatment becomes personalized based on the individual and the stage in which they reside. With this method, “change behavior” is thought of as a fluid and dynamic evolution, with possible recycling of stages, rather than focusing on the end goal of change.

The importance of discussing the common and potential risk of relapse allows for the focus to be shifted from a failure mindset to the success that was achieved up until the point of relapse. Allowing the discussion of relapse in a non-punitive manner leads to an honest examination of lessons learned regarding the individual, their triggers, and better ways to address those triggers. I have used this model to design the intervention to create an encouraging and conducive environment for behavior change and adopt a plant-based and more conscious diet and lifestyle¹⁶.

Strategies for facilitators

Sharing information on the environmental and health impact of plant-based diet can motivate a few participants but might be limiting, but in order to achieve long-term dietary change and maintenance can be increased by participatory workshops and community engagement¹⁷.

Holding a space for immersive learning experiences that support the participants to try more plant based-food in a more inclusive and safe way to share concerns, goals and plans for their future. Having facilitators and participants embody care, empathy, and curiosity during these experiential gatherings has a better influence on the motivation to adopt plant-based diet, improve connection to self, community and nature. These workshops allow the participants to see the interconnectedness of different systems, climate change, individual and collective actions.



The Earth's Kitchen program is designed to be dynamic and adaptable, focusing on fostering plant-based dietary habits and community engagement and support.

Earth's Kitchen is a community platform that provides tools and resources to facilitate the transition to a plant-based diet. Through community potlucks and immersive learning experiences, it aims to support individuals in adopting healthier and more sustainable dietary choices.

It comprises three main components, in-person gatherings, tools and resources, and plant-based activities. Through participatory workshops and community potlucks, it creates supportive environments for individuals to explore and adopt climate smart dietary habits. These community engagements empower participants, promote healing, joy, and idea generation, and foster openness to change.

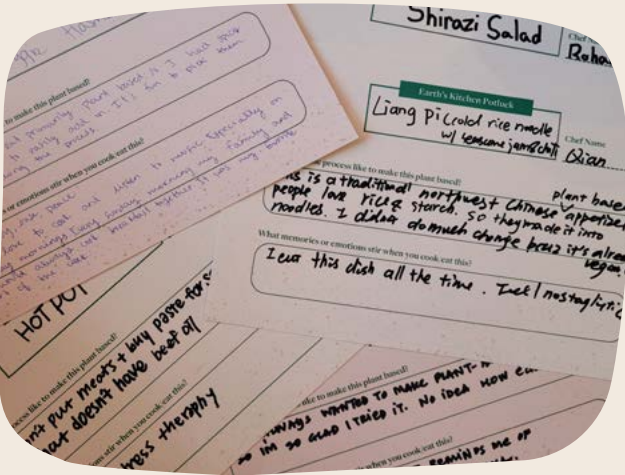


Image: Participants reflections from pilot testing workshop.



Image: Participants sharing a meal and conversations at the pilot testing.



Environmental Health is Public Health

A kit to build capacity to be an advocate for a more regenerative future and the Plant Based Treaty to plan their own community plant-based potlucks. Tools are activators, adding them as guides to be effective advocates for plant based living through community plant-based potlucks. Through help with planning, sharing resources, building skill set, culinary literacy while also building a connection with others in the community. A community potluck is a wonderful opportunity to share information on plant-based diet, food and agricultural systems, climate change and transform your community.

Holding spaces to forging meaningful, intentional connections with like-minded people and cultivating a supportive community centered around shared values and goals.¹⁸ While we facilitate these potlucks to share delicious plant-based food by the participants present at the event, it is partnered with conversations around food, community, nature, along with activities that help you reflect on your commitment and action plans for self, community, and planet.



“At its core, the issue of a clean environment is a matter of public health.”

-Gina McCarthy
Former Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

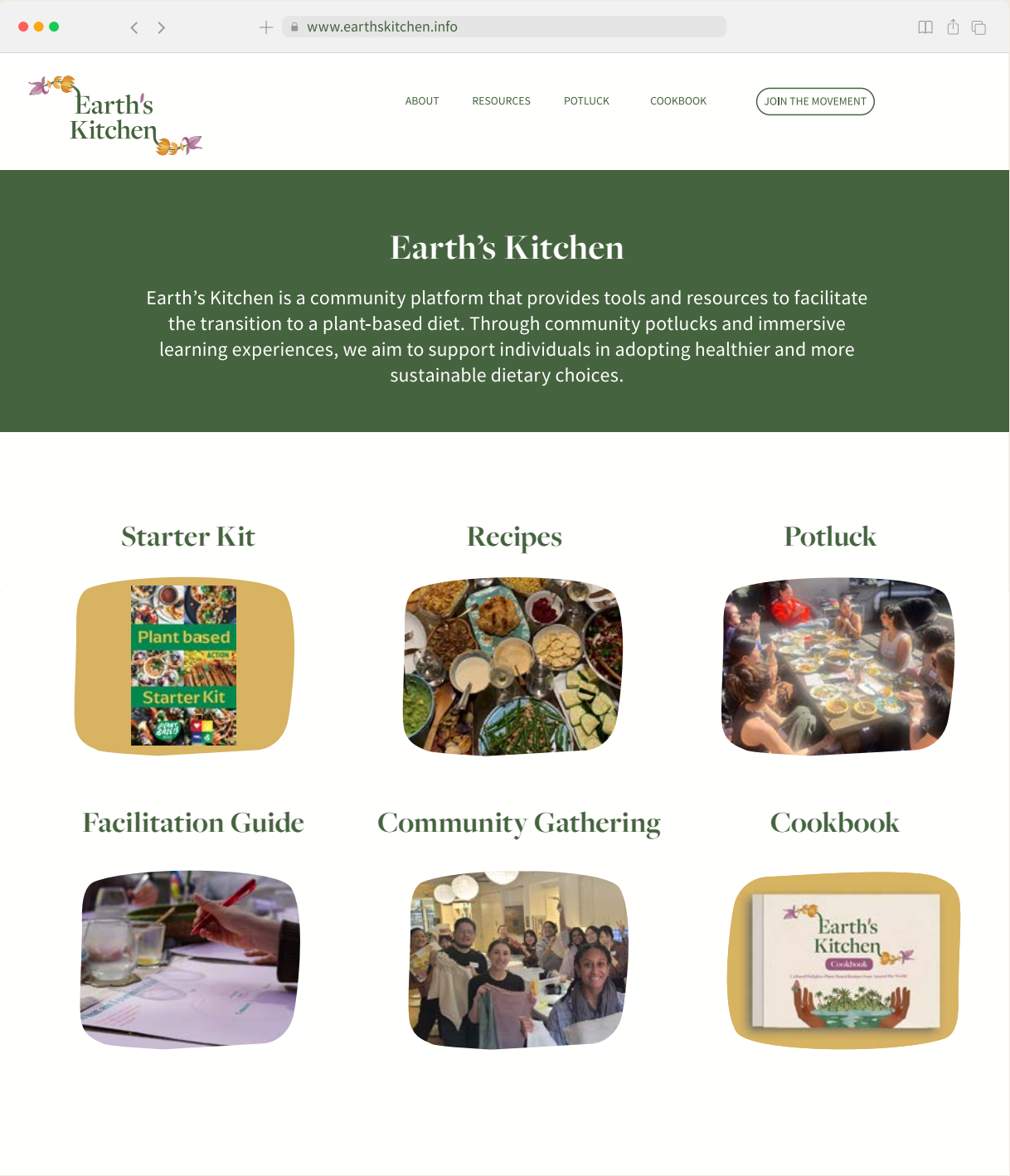


Image: Earth’s Kitchen digital platform.

How can we build agency?

Predictors of long-term dietary adherence include social support and positive social norms affirming the intended behavior, a food environment that offers “healthy defaults”, and a variety of intra-personal, cultural, and economic factors such as self-efficacy education, convenience, food access, and others.

The plant-based starter kit includes resources, grocery list, recipes, framework, guidelines, reflective activities, valued, sustainable practices, PBT endorsement details.

Preparation list, ways to make the potluck more climate friendly. Having folders and documents to add to the resources, using iterative design process, collecting topics of discussion, ideas from the participants so it can be used for other community potlucks.

Activities that allow the participants to reflect on their actions and equip them with the tools to make changes to their behavior and adopt a more climate conscious lifestyle.



Image: Plant-based Starter Kit.

Potluck

The word originally meant “the luck of the pot,” or food for an unexpected guest. During the Great Depression, communities held potlucks to share their limited food resources, with guests bringing their own food.

These potluck based workshops are aimed at building capacity to be able to cook plant-based meals and community connections, and be inspired by each other. Bringing their own food works better than only providing food as the participants are compelled to access the resources shared like the plant-based starter kit with information on nutritional benefits of plant-based diet, culturally relevant grocery list, recipes from nutritionists and vegan chefs.

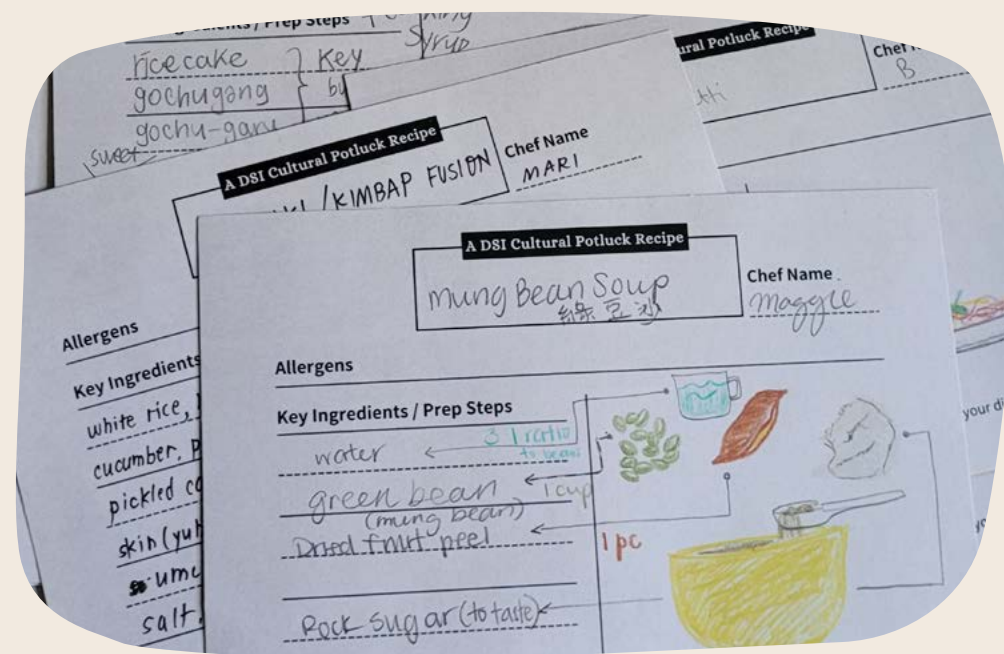
Nurture a sense of community by inspiring shared experiences and memories, which is the most powerful form of connection. Facilitating a collaborative conversation with the participants to reflect on social issues and or related to plant-based lifestyle to evoke behavior change on their own terms, has been shown to increase motivation in doing so.



Pilot Testing

The pilot testing of Earth’s Kitchen through the plant-based potluck brunch provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of the program in fostering community engagement and promoting climate smart dietary habits.

By creating a supportive and inclusive environment, participants felt encouraged to share their experiences and ideas, leading to meaningful dialogue and mutual inspiration. This successful pilot test demonstrates the potential of Earth’s Kitchen to empower individuals and communities on their journey towards plant-based living.



Earth's Kitchen

Gathering



Tools



Plant based Activities





Measuring Impact

Environmental Impact Considerations

We shared the leftovers, used reusable cutlery, instead of buying , sourced things from the community, we discussed ways to be environmentally conscious in our daily lives by making small conscious choices such as opting for plant-based food, buying locally and regionally, reducing waste, using the whole plant, moving away from single use plastic, and re-purposing. One of the mitigation techniques is to use recycled or seed paper.

Intervention Impact

These gatherings not only focused on plant-based eating but also emphasized environmental consciousness and sustainable living practices. By incorporating these discussions and actions into our events, we encouraged participants to make small yet impactful choices in their daily lives. We observed a genuine desire among participants to build connections with themselves, nature, and the community while taking action to contribute positively to the planet. By addressing barriers and creating a supportive and encouraging atmosphere, participants felt empowered to make better and informed choices and progress gradually towards a more environmentally friendly lifestyle.

Theory of Change

The Theory of Change (TOC) narrative for establishing a plant-based community and promoting intergenerational adoption of plant-based diet among New York City residents is multifaceted and aims to address several interconnected factors.

The thesis goals are: increased adoption of plant based diet and increased endorsement of the Plant based Treaty. The overarching strategy for the thesis project is to facilitate this shift by increasing awareness, knowledge and skills along with a sense of community which in turn would drive new behaviors and practices.

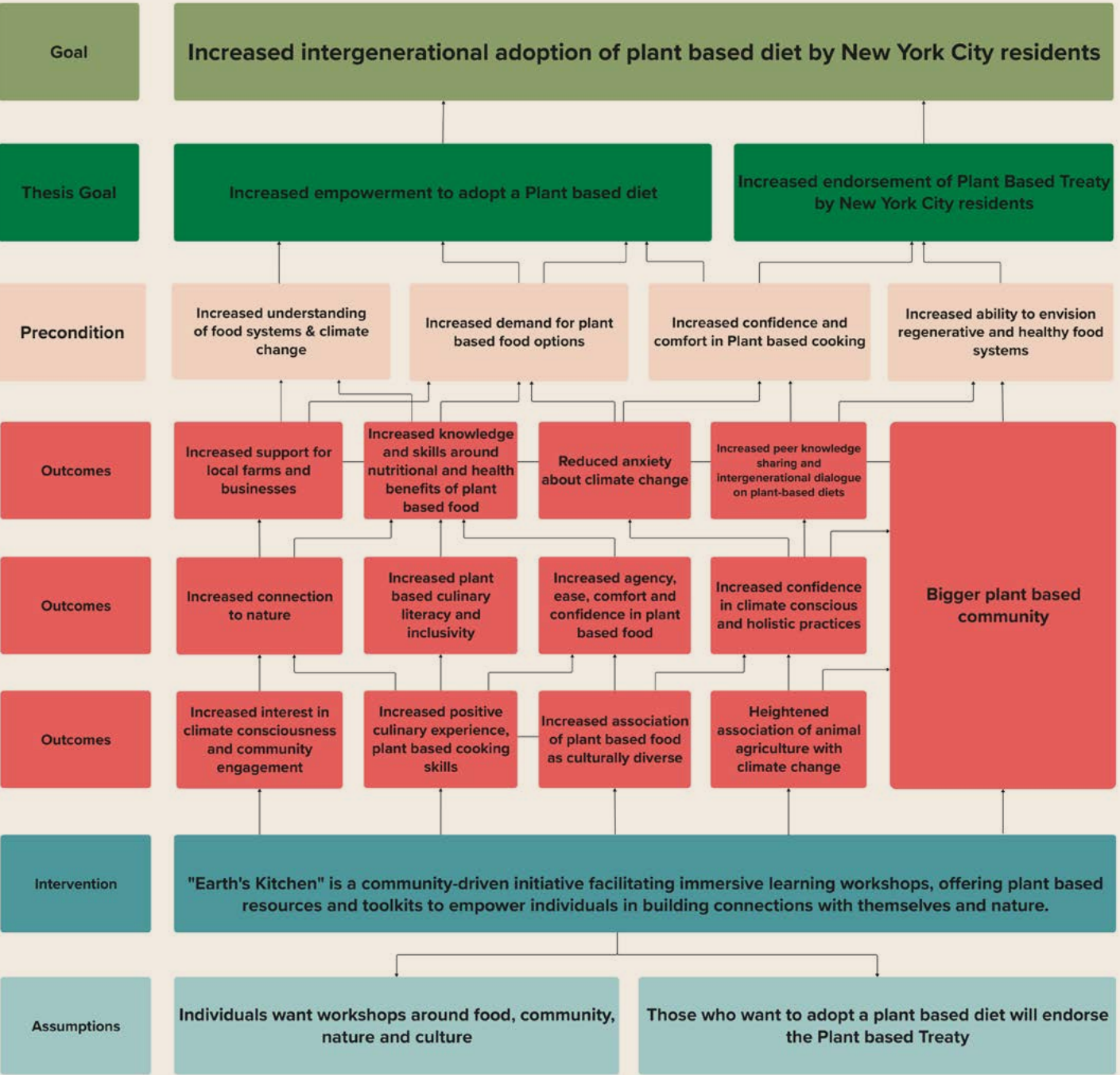
Key Pathways of the Theory of Change

The outcomes lead to individual behavior changes, and the preconditions are changes focused at a societal level. To achieve these outcomes, the intervention involves facilitating community-led immersive learning workshops, offering plant-based resources and toolkits to empower individuals in building connections with themselves and nature. The TOC relies on three key pathways: increasing awareness of food systems and climate change, fostering skills and knowledge around a plant-based diet and lifestyle, and building community through peer knowledge sharing and intergenerational dialogue on a plant-based diet.

Earth’s Kitchen

The “Earth’s Kitchen” initiative has sparked a significant transformation in participants’ attitudes and behaviors towards sustainable living and dietary choices. One notable outcome is the heightened climate consciousness and community engagement observed among participants. Through the initiative’s activities, individuals have developed a deeper connection to nature and have demonstrated increased support for local farms and businesses, reflecting a broader commitment to environmental stewardship.

Furthermore, participants have reported tangible shifts in their dietary habits and perceptions of plant-based foods. They have expressed greater confidence in preparing plant-based meals and have embraced the diverse cultural aspects of these food choices. This newfound confidence has empowered individuals to make climate-conscious decisions, alleviating anxiety about climate change and fostering a sense of agency in contributing to solutions. Moreover, the initiative’s emphasis on peer knowledge sharing and intergenerational dialogue has created a supportive community environment, leading to increased endorsement of initiatives like the Plant-Based Treaty and driving collective action towards sustainable dietary practices.



Monitoring and Evaluation

To measure the impact of “Earth’s Kitchen” and test its Theory of Change, the following metrics will be carried out to check if the intervention increases adoption plant-based diet and endorsement of the plant-based Treaty by New York City residents. Monitoring and evaluating the key indicators like increased agency, confidence around climate related decisions and increase in community engagement and plant based experience is associated with being easy, inclusive, culturally relevant, and holistic.

Monitoring Questions:

Quantitative:

1. How many participants signed up for the workshops?
2. How many participants attended the workshops?
3. How many workshops were conducted in a month?
4. No. of resources distributed with participants
5. How many participants think animal agriculture contributes to climate change?
6. How many participants associate plant based diet to being easy?
7. How many participants associate plant based diet to being culturally relevant?
8. How many participants associate plant based diet to being inclusive?

Qualitative:

1. Feedback and suggestions for future workshops
2. Stories shared during the workshop
3. Recipes and food shared together
4. Concerns, ideas, connections formed during the workshop around food, community, environment, future
5. What activities the participants find most engaging, useful and effective?

Evaluation Questions:

Quantitative:

1. How many participants feel empowered enough to cook plant based meals?
2. How many returning participants?
3. How many participants endorsed the plant based treaty?
4. How many want to be a part of the plant based community?
5. How many participants volunteer with the Plant based Treaty community?

Qualitative:

1. Testimonials, stories, feedback shared by participants post the workshops
2. Any progress or update shared by the participants related to climate, food and community
3. Update on their concerns, feelings related to climate change
4. Sharing communication with peers regarding plant based living and the treaty
5. If they have shared the resources with peers and carried out activities on their own

Next steps:

Formulate materials based on community engagement activities and develop educational materials, toolkits, and resources. These materials will be tailored to address the specific needs and preferences of the target audience, empowering individuals to make informed decisions about adopting plant based dietary practices. Keep developing the cookbook with diverse plant-based recipes.

Collaborate with Plant-Based Treaty (PBT) to co-design workshops aimed at training volunteers and facilitators in conducting immersive workshops. Implementing a train-the-trainer model will enable the project to expand its reach and empower more individuals to advocate for sustainable food choices within their communities while enduring it is value driven, inclusive and encouraging.

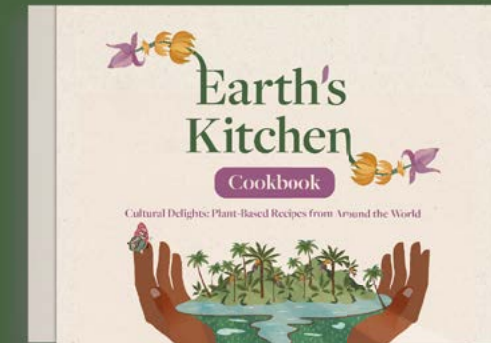
Scale the project by partnering and engaging more with local organizations, businesses, and community groups that share an interest in promoting plant forward initiatives. By leveraging existing networks and resources, the project can amplify its impact and reach a wider audience. Engage community members through outreach efforts, workshops, and events to raise awareness and foster collaboration towards a shared goal of mitigating climate change through dietary choices.

Prepare resources for the Youth Summit by the Department of Health & Mental Hygiene in June and ensuring that all materials, toolkits, and resources are ready. This includes plant-based resources, workshop outlines, log books, promotional materials, and any other resources necessary to effectively communicate the project's goals and objectives to a diverse audience of youth advocates. By participating in the Youth Summit, the project can further amplify its message and inspire young leaders to take action on climate change through sustainable dietary practices.

Addressing this social issue requires sustained effort, as undoing the damage caused by our lifestyle choices, capitalist systems, and conflicts will take time. However, I am driven by the vision of a future where the environment is restored, and future generations can experience nature as previous generations did.

Facilitation and community gatherings have emerged as my passion, as they provide a safe space for individuals to share their concerns, challenges, and aspirations for the future. Through these interactions, we empower each other to take action and foster a sense of collective responsibility.

I **remain hopeful** that as people connect more deeply with nature, they will develop a greater respect for it, cultivate compassion, and adopt a more holistic approach to living. While the journey towards environmental restoration may be long and challenging, it is one that I am committed to, knowing that it holds the promise of a brighter and more sustainable future for all.



**PLANT
BASED
TREATY**



Glossary

1. **Behavioral Change:** The process of modifying an individual's actions, attitudes, and habits to improve their performance, productivity, and overall well-being in the workplace
2. **Boomer:** Baby boomers, often shortened to boomers, are the demographic cohort following the Silent Generation and preceding Generation X. The generation is often defined as people born from 1946 to 1964 during the mid-20th century baby boom.
3. **Climate Change:** Long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. These shifts may be natural, but since the 1800s, human activities have been the main driver of climate change, primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels (like coal, oil, and gas), agriculture which produce heat-trapping gases.
4. **Community Engagement:** The process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices (CDC, 1997).
5. **Conscious Living:** Adopting a lifestyle that is more aware – or conscious – of the things going on around us as they happen. Many people who turn to a conscious way of living will find that they spend more time enjoy moments as they occur rather than thinking ahead too much and making plans.
6. **Ecosystem Map:** A synthetic representation capturing all the key roles that have an influence on the user, organization and service environment. The ecosystem map is built by first displaying all the entities, and then connecting them based on the type of value they exchange.
7. **Environmental Footprint:** Takes into account the entirety of supply and demand of goods and services for the planet.
8. **Food Systems:** The concept of a “food system” represents a contrast to notions of agriculture and food production and consumption as a simple, linear chain from farm to table. Food systems are instead, complex networks that include all the inputs and outputs associated with agricultural and food production and consumption. Food systems can vary substantially from place to place and over time, depending on location specific conditions.
9. **Flexitarian:** A person following a semi-vegetarian diet, one that is centered on plant foods with limited or occasional inclusion of meat.
10. **Gap Analysis:** A method of assessing the performance of a business unit to determine whether business requirements or objectives are being met and, if not, what steps should be taken to meet them.
11. **Gen X: Following the Baby Boomers and preceding Millennials. People born from 1965 to 1980**
12. **Gen Z:** Generation Z, colloquially known as Zoomers, is the demographic cohort succeeding Millennials and preceding Generation Alpha. Researchers and popular media use the mid-to-late 1990s as starting birth years and the early 2010s as ending birth years.
13. **Green House Gases:** Green house gases (also known as GHGs) are gases in the earth's atmosphere that trap heat.
14. **Holistic:** Characterized by the belief that the parts of something are interconnected and can be explained only by reference to the whole.
15. **Intervention:** The act of interfering with the outcome or course especially of a condition or process (as to prevent harm or improve functioning)
16. **Livestock:** Domesticated animals raised in an agricultural setting in order to provide labor and produce diversified products for consumption such as meat, eggs, milk, fur, leather, and wool.
17. **Millenials:** A person born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s; a member of Generation Y.
18. **Plant based:** A non-animal-derived meat, poultry or seafood alternative that can be used instead of animal-derived products such as burgers, meatballs, sausages, chicken nuggets and deli meats.
19. **Prototypes:** A first, typical or preliminary model of something, especially a machine, from which other forms are developed or copied.
20. **Rainwater harvesting:** The collection and storage of rain, rather than allowing it to run off.
21. **Sustainability:** Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
22. **Theory of Change:** A method that explains how a given intervention, or set of interventions, is expected to lead to specific development change, drawing on a causal analysis based on available evidence.
23. **Veganism:** The practice of abstaining from the use of animal products—particularly in diet—and an associated philosophy that rejects the commodity status of animals. A person who follows the diet or philosophy is known as a vegan.

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To the entire DSI community– Thank you for wholeheartedly participating in my plant-based explorations and supporting my endeavors.



The title is framed by two decorative floral sprigs. The top-left sprig features a purple flower, a yellow flower, and a green bud. The bottom-right sprig features a yellow flower, a green bud, and a purple flower. Both sprigs have green stems and leaves.

Earth's Kitchen

MFA Design for Social Innovation Thesis
School of Visual Arts, New York City
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