

What's wrong with waste?

Tom MacMillan

Wasting food upsets me. Composting that mouldy carrot feels like burying a neglected pet. Yet I do waste food and, unless I'm an anomaly, research by the UK's Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP) suggests I actually squander far more than I think I do.¹

Government's current war on waste, including WRAP's 'Love Food, Hate Waste' campaign and Hilary Benn's attack on 'sell by' dates, focuses on resource efficiency. Waste hurts your wallet and hurts the planet. This edition abounds with numbers to underline this point: wasted food costs UK households hundreds of pounds a year; around seven million tonnes of food end up in landfill in the UK annually; and producing and distributing edible food that goes to waste may account for as much as 5% of total UK greenhouse gas emissions. This is hardly just a British problem either: Timothy Jones (p.11) reports that US households throw away nearly a quarter of fruit and vegetables, and 13% of meat.

However, there are other reasons, in addition to this utilitarian logic, that society frowns on waste in general and on food waste in particular. For one, waste is deeply unfair. Tristram Stuart (pp.8-10) estimates that avoidable waste of cereal-based foods in Britain and the USA alone would be enough to lift 224 million people out of hunger. Producing food for landfill has a tragic opportunity cost.

I expect I am not alone, though, in finding that my own unease with waste isn't fully explained by these numbers. The fact is, wasting food just feels wrong. Whether this is moral intuition or simply habit is an open question. After all, wastefulness and the waste itself can each provoke disgust, and the taboos around both endlessly engross anthropologists.

So, wasting food is inefficient and unfair, and it seems plain wrong. Cutting waste clearly helps with the last of these three problems, but what about the other two? If we waste less food, will that actually benefit other people or the environment?

The answer depends on what we do with food waste, and on what else we would do with the labour, land, water and energy that we save along the supply chain.

The best scenario is that the productive resources we save get diverted towards feeding hungry people. The trouble is, this isn't guaranteed. In fact, we know that hunger and malnutrition can exist when food is readily available. Absolute and relative poverty, rather than food prices per se, are the key determinants of household food security.

Far more likely, all else being equal, is that resources we save by cutting food waste will be put to producing and consuming other things. These might include growing more resource-intensive and expensive foods, producing bioenergy or textiles, or making industrial products. Is wasted food necessarily a worse use of resources? As long as the 'waste' doesn't go to landfill – if it is used for compost and anaerobic

If we waste less food, will that actually benefit other people or the environment?

digestion, or goes to food banks like the UK's FareShare or New York's City Harvest – you could argue it is better than producing goods to meet new, yet to be invented, consumer demands.

A third scenario is that, where resources are being used unsustainably, they drop out of production altogether – we start to live within our economic and ecological means. Cutting food waste alone won't make this happen. It depends on also constraining the ravenous scavenge for resources and drive to consume that economic growth impels. At the very least, that requires that we manage resource use more tightly, for instance through more effective pollution controls, emissions pricing and production

standards. But, even then, the risk is this exacerbates hunger, since many of the world's least food secure people depend on farming for a livelihood.

So, food waste feels morally wrong yet, to make good on all the aspirations we attach to waste reduction – to be fairer and more efficient – we need to do a stack of other things besides planning meals carefully and cleaning our plates.

First, we can only claim that reducing food waste helps food security if it goes hand-in-hand with a massive boost to international efforts to tackle poverty and hunger. Rich countries including the UK have repeatedly fudged commitments to meet these Millennium Development Goals.

Second, reducing food waste will only make a lasting dent in our environmental footprint if, in the words of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, we aim for 'prosperity without growth'. Our structural commitment to economic growth means that, to date, increases in per capita consumption have outstripped savings from greater efficiency. Unless we confront the causes of our throwaway society, throwing away less food will not make our lifestyles more sustainable.

Where does this leave me and my rotten carrots? I certainly need to be sure they won't end up in landfill. But am I obliged to reduce my waste in the hope that this will prompt governments and businesses to do their bit? And if they don't, does that mean I'm just wasting my time instead of my food? These are not trivial or frivolous concerns – on the contrary, they highlight the profound difficulties in understanding whether our moral intuitions about food waste provide a reliable basis for ethical action. The contributions to this edition should help us to decide. ■

Reference

1. Ventour, L. (2008) The Food We Waste. WRAP. p.209.