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Is the Mediterranean Diet Sustainable?

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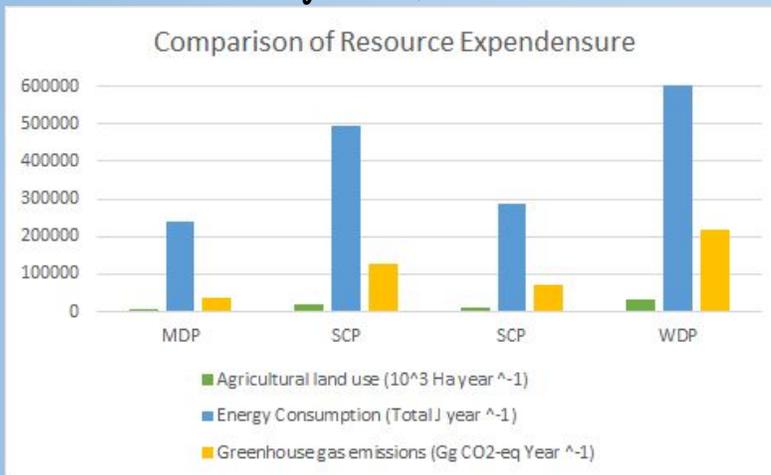
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Is the Mediterranean Diet Sustainable?

What is the Mediterranean Diet? The Mediterranean Diet is mostly plant based, but includes small amounts of animal products and meat (Sáez-Almendros, 2013). For example, the MD includes high consumption of vegetables, fruits, grains, nuts, and legumes; and low to moderate amounts of fish, dairy products and eggs (Boccardi, 2018).

What does it mean to be environmentally sustainable? Food production causes environmental pressures that are related to climate change; including water use, greenhouse gas emissions and toxic emissions. Different diets and food items have varying environmental footprints, leading us to investigate the sustainability of the MD (Sáez-Almendros, 2013). Being sustainable means to produce what you need now, without ruining the resources needed for the next generation.

Environmental Impacts of the Mediterranean Diet in comparison to Western diets



Increasing complexity of the food chain creates a trend to have a greater flow of food commodities over long distances, which causes people to consume highly processed and packaged foods that contribute to increased greenhouse emissions and depleting non-renewable resources (Verger, 2018). The MD includes more raw plant based food that contribute less to the greenhouse gas emissions compared to diets that include more complex foods from the food chain (like livestock and fish). Compared to the three other Western diets listed on the graph, the MD has the least resource expenditure in all three contexts.

Figure 1: data from Sáez-Almendros (2013). Comparison of the resources expended for the traditional Western and Spanish diets to the Mediterranean diet.

How sustainable is the Mediterranean Diet compared to other diets?

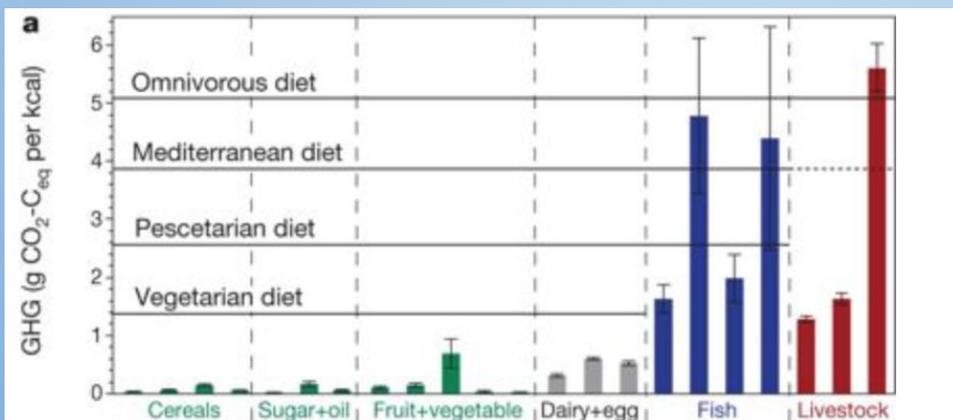


Figure 2: (Tillman et al., 2014). Bar graph showing the average amount of Greenhouse gas emissions produced by a variety of diets. For example, the omnivorous diet has the highest GHG because livestock and fish are large contributors.

In terms of Greenhouse Gas production the Mediterranean diet is more sustainable than the Omnivorous diet but less sustainable than the Pescetarian Diet and the Vegetarian Diet. Not included in Figure 2 is the Vegan diet which is the most sustainable (Castane, 2017). The regional biodiversity impact of the Mediterranean diet was also around three times higher than the vegan diets.

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