

ecoIslam

Voice of the Islamic
Foundation for
Ecology and
Environmental
Sciences



Nourishing the soul

Wherever there's a Muslim community there's bound to be a butcher, abattoir and kebab shop nearby. The one thing they have in common is that all too familiar 'halal' logo that is probably the most recognised Arabic symbol in the world - even more so than the name of God.

'Halal' in our society has come to mean 'okay for Muslims to eat,' a kind of Islamic green light to go ahead and consume to our hearts' content. But whilst we are good at fussing over the technical definition of 'halal' we have totally lost sight of its spirit. We can eat our way into physical obesity whilst doing nothing to nourish our souls.

The physical effect of what you put in your body is easy to measure but the spiritual consequences are often overlooked. The definition of 'halal' (permissible) cannot be reduced to just ritual slaughter techniques. If we look at Islam's emphasis on moderation, charity, sacrifice, fasting and kindness to animals, it is apparent that our relationship with what we eat is about more than just filling our stomachs.

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www.ifees.org.uk

"The creation of the heavens and the earth is far greater than the creation of humankind. But most of humankind do not know it." (Qur'an 40:57)

Think before you eat

Obesity and diet-related health problems are affecting millions in the developed world and Muslims are no exception. In some countries problems like heart disease and diabetes are worst among Muslim communities. The irony is that Muslims do think before they eat, whether it be sourcing a trusted halal butcher or waiting for the exact time to break fast in Ramadan. So despite following the letter of the law, where are we going wrong?

Food for Thought

Health is Wealth

...continued

What to eat

The Qur'an instructs Muslims to eat food that is both 'halal' and 'tayyab' (pure/wholesome), so the food of Muslims should fulfil both criteria. This means taking into account where the food has come from and the conditions under which it was prepared. In the case of meat many issues need to be considered including the treatment of animals and what they were fed.

When to eat

Muslims should eat to live, not live to eat. This is in complete contrast to the consumption-oriented society we live in. The dietary examples of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) have been forgotten. Meat is no longer considered a special blessing but consumed thoughtlessly, sometimes more than once a day. Consequently the slaughter of an animal that is a great sacrifice made at momentous moments in a person's life (*walima*, *aqiqah*, *hajj*) has almost lost its significance.

When not to eat

Muslims have managed to turn Ramadan from a deeply spiritual time of connecting with God, practicing self-restraint and remembering the poor to a month of just adjusting eating times and still managing to put on weight and consume elaborate meals. This kind of 'Ramadan' is clearly not working for us anymore.

How much to eat

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, *"No human being has ever filled a container worse than his own stomach. The son of Adam needs no more than a few morsels of food to keep up his strength. He should consider that a third of his stomach is for food, a third for drink and a third for breathing."*

Shagufta Yaqub



Signs on the earth, signs in the self

The so-called developed world is witnessing the outbreak of an obesity pandemic. Ironically the super-sized patients being admitted to hospital are also clinically undernourished because most of what they eat is devoid of any nutritional value. Their organs are breaking down under the load they carry whilst a lack of vitamins and minerals is affecting their brain function and behaviour. Delinquency, depression and dementia are now endemic and diet is a recognised factor.

A number of recent exposés of the junk food market have shown that the corporate food industry is without scruples when it comes to exploitation of our appetites, especially targeting children. There is an unholy alliance with the agricultural industry whose animal victims are raised in conditions of persecution and confinement and whose vegetables are grown by migrant slave labour in conditions of extreme toxicity. And yet so much of this food ends up with the 'halal' stamp on it.

Muslims make the mistake of differentiating themselves from the so-called natural world but the signs are within our own selves because we are also part of the earth. We are a natural species and our own tissue is subject to the same toxins that destroy all planetary species. If we wish to survive as a species, let alone as Muslims, we must emerge from collective denial and work towards change.

It is the collective responsibility of Muslims to establish the rule of justice on earth but there is a lack of will on the part of Muslim leaders and scholars to engage in a robust examination of the current crises from an Islamic perspective. Much of the Islamic teaching today focuses on individual self-perfection and personal morality but diverts attention away from the injustices perpetrated against the human race as a whole. This needs to change. The Islamic tradition of 'hijra' (migration) that aims to improve the conditions of Muslims is not necessarily about 'where we go' in today's world but of 'what we do.'

Saba Khalid

Nowhere else to go

Editorial

Many of us want to achieve something worthwhile in our lives; something we will be remembered by. But as a generation we risk leaving a legacy that no-one will thank us for. Our toxic footprint is destroying the delicate nature of the earth for future generations.

By now we have all heard about climate change and its disastrous consequences. The experts have spoken, politicians have uttered their platitudes, environmental activists have called for action, the flat earthers remain in denial and the rest of us go shopping. Somehow we are failing to wake up to the fact that if the planet suffers we all suffer, and that we have nowhere else to go.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has confirmed that climate change is here to stay and will "continue for centuries," thus increasing the probability that the curse of future generations will hang forever on this marauding civilisation of ours. Yet we continue to rationalise the destruction of the planet as if we live somewhere else - the Moon, perhaps?

We have lost sight of ourselves as being a part of nature. Destroying the natural world means we destroy ourselves. We have reduced nature, and by extension ourselves, to an exploitable resource. Our global civilisation is artificial, resting on industrial and financial systems in the singular pursuit of profit.

Buy now, pay later

Despite knowing about the devastating effects of climate change, few in our profit-driven society are willing to commit to an alternative approach. Industry will continue to expand; banks will continue to lend the money they create out of nothing; under-developed countries will strive to emulate the rampant Chinese and Indian economies; developed nations, particularly in the West, will continue to covet the world's resources, even at the expense of going to war for them.

In our eagerness to "progress" and "develop", we have lost sight of the finite and delicate nature of the earth and humanity's place in it. Until quite recently, the human race functioned unconsciously within natural, unwritten boundaries. They had an intuitive disposition to live within the natural state (fitra), though this was achieved by a conscious recognition of the existence of a superior force, the divine. This was an existential reality, neither idyllic nor utopian.

We are clearly no longer functioning within these limits. Until now, excess in the natural order was contained because it was biodegradable. When old civilizations, however opulent, profligate, greedy, or brutal, died, the forests just grew over them or the sands covered their traces. They left no pollutants, damaging poisons or nuclear waste. By contrast, and assuming we survive as a species, archaeologists excavating our present rampant civilisation are going to have wear radiation protection suits.

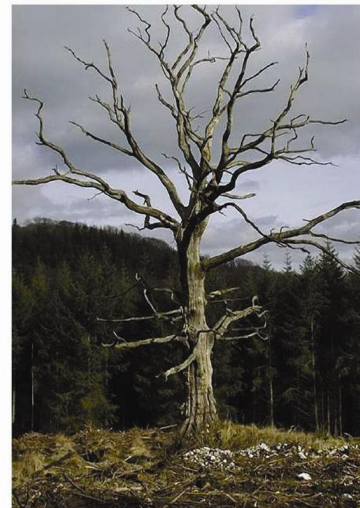
The Qur'an warns us:

Corruption has appeared in both land and sea
Because of what people's own hands have brought about
So that they may taste something of what they have done
So that hopefully they will turn back (30:40)

But will we?

Fazlun Khalid, founder-director of IFEES.

A version of this article first appeared in The Green Room discussions on the BBC News website - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6343447.stm>

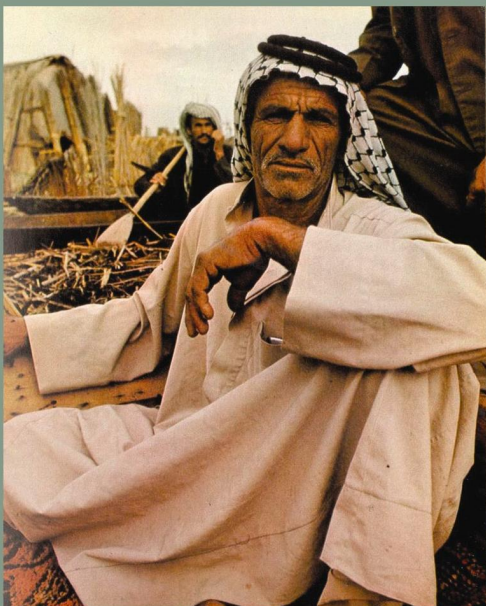


Saving Iraq's marshes

Ecocide



Iraqi marshes © Gavin Young (1983)



'Return to the Marshes',
Cox and Wyman Ltd.,
Reading

War and ecology

Southern Iraq is home to one of the world's largest and most valuable wetland ecosystems. These marshes have been under threat since the 1980s and ongoing political instability has reduced them to just 7% of their original size. The area once famous for its ancient history, biodiversity and cultural richness now desperately needs restoring.

Iraq's marshes are thought to be the birthplace of the prophet Abraham (peace be upon him) and according to some traditions, the site of the Garden of Eden. They are inhabited by Arab tribes who migrated to the area hundreds of years ago and are well known for their alluring way of life. They live in harmony with the environment on manmade reed islands along the periphery of the marshes, growing rice and dates, raising water buffalo and fishing.

The marshes are also the permanent habitat of millions of birds including over 60 species that may now be at risk; other populations are also thought to be in serious decline including coastal fisheries.

Environmental genocide (Ecocide)

The destruction of the marshes began during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s when its waters were diverted to form a military barrier against Iran. Salt water from the Gulf entered and damaged the fresh water ecology and a military road was constructed in the middle of the marshes, drying up large areas.

However the worst destruction of this unique culture, environment and landscape occurred in the aftermath of the second Gulf War when huge populations sought refuge in the marsh jungle. Large-scale engineering programmes drained the marshes by constructing massive manmade rivers, canals and dams. This destroyed the lives and livelihoods of around half a million people. Tens of thousands of Marsh Arabs were forced to seek refuge elsewhere, most of them living in extreme poverty.



Hamid Ahmed with marsh Arabs and guards during his recent visit to Iraq

In 2003, following the US invasion and collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, locals broke down the dams and dykes, re-flooding nearly 20% of the marshes. According to a recent United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report, almost 60% of the marshes are now covered by water.

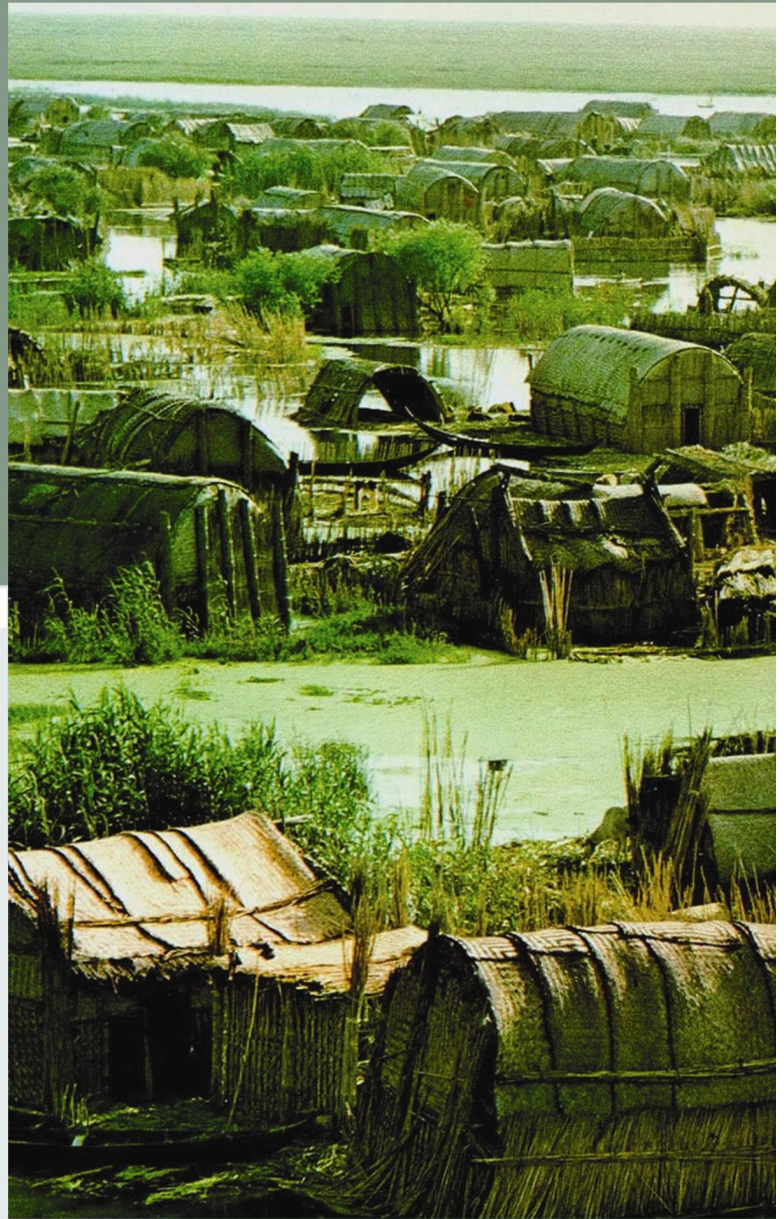
Restoring hope

The task of restoring Iraq's marshes has been led by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in co-ordination with other global players. They have agreed that their efforts should be co-ordinated and ethical and that they must include native Iraqis, especially marsh refugees, and preserve the continuity of indigenous marsh culture. However it is now apparent that limited water supply in the region could seriously halt these restoration efforts.

In a recent visit to Iraq I attended the second international conference on the rehabilitation of the marshes organised by the Marine Science Centre at Basrah University. Most of the research was optimistic that a significant portion of the marshes could be restored and maintained. I also visited the Al-Hammar marshes where I saw the reeds, birds and fisheries activities indicating a promising revival of the ecosystem.

The marshland of southern Iraq is, I believe, a sizeable ecosystem with its own right to exist as part of our planet, regardless of the politics of the region. It deserves to be restored and improved as part of humanity's cultural, ecological and historical heritage. With goodwill and dedication, this lifeless land could once again become a Garden of Eden.

Hamid K. Ahmed Visiting Professor at Basrah University



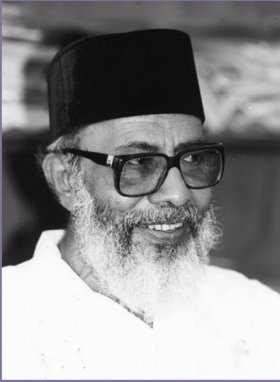
Iraqi marshes © Gavin Young (1983)



Hamid Ahmed with marsh Arabs and guards during his recent visit to Iraq

Reviving a lost heritage

Eco-personality



SM Mohamed Idris has been involved in the environmental movement since his youth. He leads a simple life in Malaysia, practicing what he preaches. A believer in consumer restraint, he is President of the Consumer Association of Penang and among other things, publishes the Utusan Konsumer, which pioneered environmental reporting in Malaysia. He has also led Friends of the Earth Malaysia since 1977 and managed to influence both public opinion and government policy.

Known fondly as 'Brother Idris' by all, he believes in working with diverse communities in the struggle to protect the environment. He is a vegetarian and dresses in Tamil Muslim-style clothing (dhoti and jippa) with a 'songkok' hat.

How did you get involved in the environmental movement?

I have been concerned about the environment since I was a young man, influenced by the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and great thinkers like Tolstoy and Gandhi. In the early 1970s, fishermen in a small village in Penang, who depended on fishing for their livelihood, found thousands of dead fish floating in the river. The issue was taken up by the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP), of which I was chairman and we discovered that pollution from nearby factories was to blame. From then on we took a special interest in environmental issues and lobbied the government to enact environmental protection laws.

How has the environmental movement in Malaysia evolved over the years?

In the 1970s the international community became increasingly concerned about environmental problems. In Malaysia we organised several conferences that led to the formation of Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM or Friends of the Earth Malaysia) in 1977. Since SAM was formed, the environmental movement here has grown stronger, influencing both public opinion and government policy. Environmental journalism is also now in the mainstream media with wide coverage given to issues like the destruction of forests, pollution from toxic waste and climate change.

How well has Malaysia addressed issues of endangered biodiversity?

Among developing countries, Malaysia has a fairly good record in developing policy and guidelines to protect our biodiversity. Unfortunately, there is a lot of weakness in implementation. As a result there is a serious threat to biodiversity from shortsighted emphasis on economic development and growth.

The devastating tsunami in 2004 hit the island of Penang, where you live. What can we learn from this natural catastrophe?

We must try to understand the link between natural disasters and human activity on earth. For example, if mangrove swamps along Malaysia's coastline had not been cleared for tourism and industrial projects, the impact of the tsunami would not have been so severe.

Can 'Islamic environmentalism' make a difference in the struggle to save the earth?

Yes, certainly. The Islamic concept that humankind is a vicegerent of God and is a trustee of all God's creation places a great responsibility on us to walk lightly on earth, and avoid over-consumption and waste.

The citizens of our afflicted planet include people of all faiths. How can we work together and co-operate across our religious, racial and cultural divides?

All major religions and traditional societies place great emphasis on living in harmony with nature. They condemn excessive consumption and encourage responsible use of natural resources with a view to conserving them for future generations. I believe environmentally conscious people of all faiths are in agreement that the root cause of the problem is the economic and social structure of modern society. We may have different religions but that should not be a barrier for co-operation in protecting our environment and promoting social justice.

Do you think Malaysian Muslims, being in the relative majority, are contributing enough in proportion to their numbers?

Regrettably, no. There is very little understanding among Muslims about the link between capitalist industrial society and the destruction of our environment and its ecology. The authorities that wield power in Muslim countries have no understanding of the ecological teachings of Islam. They merely imitate the policies and practices of the west that have, in less than 200 years, devastated our environment and impoverished the majority of people in the world.

In your long and distinguished career as champion for the environment, what have you learnt that you can share with readers of Ecolslam?

I believe we are suffering from a serious amnesia about our traditions, values, history and knowledge systems. We have been moulded by the secular materialistic aspects of western civilisation that are based on Godless science and have reduced everything to a commodity. Muslim policy-makers, politicians, intellectuals and professionals see no alternative to this. They may go to Mecca to perform pilgrimage every year but their views about development, human rights, the environment and justice are dictated by ideas they have acquired through western education. We need to rediscover our lost heritage and critically examine the knowledge systems and the institutions we have inherited from our colonial past. We need to be creative and develop institutions based on our religious values and traditions.

What have you done in your personal life to embody the teachings and practices of environmental conservation?

I have tried to live simply, trying to follow the example of the Prophet (peace be upon him). I encourage my children and grandchildren to avoid over-consumption and to live in harmony with all of God's creation.

Interviewed by A.R. Lubis

News and Events

Local Action

A Clean Medina is a Green Medina

Islam is peace and Muslims are seekers of the balance. The Creator has established a divine balance in the Universe, giving us glimpses in His revelations. As Muslims we strive to be the “Balanced Ones”, but when we stray from the fitrah then things get out of balance. As consumer societies drown in oceans of waste, one may well wonder where that balanced community is to be found.

Clean up our act

The Muslims are a clean community. Performing prayer without being in a state of ritual cleanliness is like lying to Allah. How can a Muslim community describe itself thus when it is infamous for being a filthy example of city squalor, where waste and rubbish swirl in the wind in front of houses and mosques; where every street and open space cries out “Shame on you all!”

So let’s green up our environment. Let’s clean up our act and make our lives like an act of prayer. It’s a massive task, but mosque to mosque, street by street it can be done. That is what the Clean Medina Campaign is all about. It has already begun in our Muslim community in Birmingham, as we begin to perceive the common good. There is a new consciousness rising within Muslims in the UK. Al Hamdulillah, I am glad to be living in the heart of Muslim Birmingham, clean Medina.

Ayman Ahwal
aymanahwal@yahoo.com

Birmingham Clean Medina Campaign is an IFEES initiative. The project is supported by Birmingham City Council and Islamic Relief. Watch out for the IFEES ‘Clean Medina Campaign’ film coming out soon.



HSBC launches IFEES posters

HSBC Bank, as part of its ‘Investing in Nature’* programme launched a new set of IFEES posters at its headquarters in Canary Wharf, London, on 24th and 25th April 07. The posters will be used by IFEES at events and exhibitions.

The launch event included a message of support from the bank’s CEO Stephen Green, read by Fakhra Brisby, Chair of the HSBC Islamic Society, and a warm speech by Francis Sullivan, WWF’s adviser to HSBC. It also included a dinner, with speeches by Fazlun Khalid (IFEES Director), Lord Sheikh and a representative from Islamic Relief, who announced that the proceeds from the HSBC Islamic Society’s fundraising drive would be given to their Sudan office’s programme planting trees to offset all their carbon emissions.

**‘Investing in Nature’ is a five-year \$50m partnership established by HSBC with WWF, Earthwatch and Botanic Gardens Conservation International, to tackle the world’s freshwater and plant extinction crises, and provide extra manpower for environmental research.*

Eco-voice of the Midlands, UK

From October '06 to April '07, the Midlands Islamic Network for the Environment (MINE) presented 'HomePlanet' every week on Unity FM, a Muslim-led Birmingham-based community radio station that can also be heard via the internet at:

www.unityfm.net

All broadcasts can be listened to again online at:

www.twango.com/channel/BirminghamFOE.HomePlanet

Fighting poverty via conservation in Lebanon

A ‘Conservation for Poverty Reduction’ workshop was held in Lebanon from 24-27th March 2007, exploring the alleviation of poverty through conservation programmes that benefit local communities living in areas rich in natural resources. The workshop was organised and attended by representatives from many countries in the region, including academics, conservation organisations and local community members. A key focus for the event was reviving the traditional ‘hima’ or protected eco-zones. Othman Llewellyn of the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development in Saudi Arabia was one of the key participants and will be sharing his extensive knowledge of ‘himas’ in the next issue of Ecolslam.

News and Events

Views and Reviews

Animal Welfare in Islam

Al-Hafiz Basheer Ahmad al Masri



This book was first published in 1988 as 'Animals in Islam' and has since been out of print. This welcome new edition has four chapters that cover everything from vegetarianism and animal sacrifice to halal meat.

Al-Hafiz al-Masri (1914-1992) shows how human beings (as in the story of Abraham and Isma'il) moved from human to animal sacrifice, and how Islam changed animal sacrifice from a way to support and enrich priests into a charitable act, benefiting pilgrims and poor people. He informs the reader of the enlightened provisions for good treatment of animals

embodied in the Islamic tradition, with specific examples from the Qur'an and Sunnah. He also discusses what other religions say about treating animals with care and respect.

For Muslims living in non-Muslim countries, Al-Masri goes into some detail about the confusing controversies about whether or not to eat the food of Christians. In a discussion on vegetarianism he personally admits to being an inveterate 'meatarian' by upbringing, "otherwise, at heart, a vegetarian by conviction." He then proceeds to demolish every logical argument for eating meat, saying, amongst other things, that all the necessary vitamins and minerals can be found in vegetarian diets if carefully balanced.

Al-Masri's scholarship is broad and well founded, and it is no surprise that this book is highly respected and has been long awaited by animal welfare activists.

Harfiyah Heleem

'Animal Welfare in Islam' is published by the Islamic Foundation, 2007, 180pp, £9.95

Letter to the editor

Dear Ecolslam,

I picked up your newsletter recently and was amazed that such a magazine existed. I've always been passionate about the environment and conservation which your magazine covered whilst also covering the Islamic perspective as well. I would just like to say well done! Thank you,

Nabeela

Seven Tips to Good Eating

"Eat of the good things We have provided for your sustenance but commit no excess therein." [Quran 20:81]

1. Eat Organic - Avoid pesticides and chemicals by buying organic produce and meat wherever possible. Organic fruit and vegetables tend to grow more slowly and have a lower water content, which may contribute to a better flavour. Halal (or zabiha) organic meat from healthy, well-treated animals will surely add spice to your kebabs.

2. Eat Local - Reduce your 'food miles' including the CO2 emissions needed to grow and transport your food. Many tomatoes are picked while hard and green to help them survive the journey to market, and then sprayed with a hormone to help them ripen. Buy fresh produce from small local farms and help support your local economy.

3. Eat Seasonal - When you eat locally, you also eat food that is in season. The nutritional quality of many fruit and vegetables degrades over time, so fresh local produce can be higher in nutrients. Buying seasonal foods also reduces demand for out-of-season produce grown in heated glasshouses which add to global warming.

4. Eat less Meat - The amount of meat eaten per person has doubled in the last 50 years. Massive areas of land are given over to growing crops for cattle whose methane emissions add to global warming. Beef is the worst offender. Excess meat consumption contributes to diseases of both the body and, according to some scholars, the soul.

5. Buy Fairtrade - Let ethics dictate your choice of food. The Prophet (peace be upon him) was an honest and successful businessman who said, "God shows mercy to a person who is kind when he sells, when he buys and when he makes a claim." (Al-Bukhari). Islamic law emphasises equity and fairness in all our transactions.

6. Grow your own Food - You don't need a huge garden to grow your favourite fruit or veg, you can grow them in containers, grow bags or even hanging baskets. Start by growing herbs in a window box or some tomatoes in grow bags. Plant fruit trees in your garden and share the crop with your friends and neighbours.

7. Compost your Scraps - "Eat and drink but do not waste, for Allah does not love the wasteful." [Quran 7:131]. Vegetable peelings, rotten fruit, stale bread, tea bags and grass cuttings are all recyclable into rich compost which will in turn help you to grow your own food. Composting is a simple way of returning food scraps to the earth, rather than dumping them in polluting landfill sites.

Samina Faiz

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