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Voices

## **Nitrogen and the food system**

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### **Care for food, care for others**

Much of the food you eat travels quite a distance before it gets to your plate. As you eat and cook in your home, it is hard to imagine the nitrogen story of these foods, but understanding it is actually important. As much as 80% of the nitrogen input into edible and fodder crops is lost to the environment on its journey to its destination. Although it is invisible as you enjoy your food, this lost nitrogen pollutes the air, the soil, and the waterways of the world. This invisibility is a huge barrier to sustainable nitrogen management. It makes it difficult for consumers, restaurant owners, retailers, and food processors to realize their contribution to nitrogen pollution and to see their role in minimizing nitrogen loss.

A nitrogen footprint makes these links visible and quantifiable: we can see which countries are polluted through the food trade, and which food items are heavy polluters. Livestock products, red meat in particular, and vegetables tend to have high footprints. We can reduce our food nitrogen footprint by choosing food items accordingly and choosing producers who make efforts to reduce nitrogen loss.

As a footprint researcher, the next step after determining the footprint is to make everyone aware of the effect of their consumption patterns on wildlife and people in areas affected by nitrogen pollution. A great barrier to this is that the geographical areas affected by nitrogen pollution may be very distant from our homes. It is my hope that one day everyone will feel the connection and take action to address the problem of nitrogen loss to the environment.

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