Vegetarians are biting off more than they can chew when they blame so many environmental ills on meat production.

In 1971, Frances Moore Lappe's classic Diet For A Small Planet cooked up a storm with vegetarian recipes for a new food system based on health, equality, democracy and environmental protection. Lappe's runaway bestseller put the excessive energy consumption and environmental destruction associated with meat production on the public agenda. Ever since, it has been recognized that industrially raised livestock - fed a diet of grains and beans instead of traditional grasses, grubs and food scraps - consume much more nutrients (often six or seven times more) than they provide to humans. And, of course, the gap between the amount of food livestock eat and the amount of food they produce for humans is made up by the manure that defiles waterways.

Unfortunately, subsequent vegetarian polemicists repeated Lappe's allegations about meat without the benefit of her critique of the corporate-dominated food system. Without any food system meat on the bones of their vegetarian analysis, their polemics ironically ended up blaming livestock, the ostensible victims of a carnivorous diet, for wasting and degrading so many scarce and precious resources. In this version, it's the livestock who produce so much manure and so little protein per unit of grain, not the system in which livestock are raised.

Lappe's allegations have been narrowly and simplistically framed by well-known writers such as John Robbins, author of the 1987 Diet For A New America and the 1992 Diet For A New World, together with Jeremy Rifkin in his 1992 book Beyond Beef A raft of articles in vegetarian and environmental magazines - most recently Jim Motavalli's run-on screed, "So You're An Environmentalist; Why Are You Still Eating Meat?" in the January 2002 E Magazine - have turned the direct relationship between meat production and environmental degradation into a dogma.

It is time to challenge this dogma.

The now-standard environmental argument against meat is shot through with reckless leaps of...