

The global food waste scandal

The winner of the international environmental award “The Sophie Prize” in 2011, Tristram Stuart is the founder of “Feeding the 5000”, a consciousness raising campaign where 5000 members of the public are given a free lunch using only ingredients that otherwise would have been wasted.

The job of uncovering the global food waste scandal started for me when I was 15 years old. I bought some pigs. I was living in Sussex. And I started to feed them in the most traditional and environmentally friendly way. I went to my school kitchen, and I said, “Give me the scraps that my school friends have turned their noses up at.” I went to the local baker and took their stale bread. I went to the local greengrocer, and I
5 went to a farmer who was throwing away potatoes because they were the wrong shape or size for supermarkets. This was great. My pigs turned that food waste into delicious pork. I sold that pork to my school friends’ parents, and I made a good pocket money addition to my teenage allowance.

But I noticed that most of the food that I was giving my pigs was in fact fit for human consumption, and that I was only scratching the surface, and that right the way up the food supply chain, in supermarkets,
10 greengrocers, bakers, in our homes, in factories and farms, we were haemorrhaging out¹ food. Supermarkets didn’t even want to talk to me about how much food they were wasting. I’d been round the back. I’d seen bins full of food being locked and then trucked off to landfill sites, and I thought, “Surely there is something more sensible to do with food than waste it.”

One morning, when I was feeding my pigs, I noticed a particularly tasty-looking sun-dried tomato loaf that
15 used to crop up from time to time. I grabbed hold of it, sat down, and ate my breakfast with my pigs. (*Laughter*) That was the first act of what I later learned to call freeganism, really an exhibition of the injustice of food waste, and the provision² of the solution to food waste, which is simply to sit down and eat food, rather than throwing it away. That became, as it were, a way of confronting large businesses in the business of wasting food, and exposing, most importantly, to the public, that when we’re talking about
20 food being thrown away, we’re not talking about rotten stuff, we’re not talking about stuff that’s beyond the pale³. We’re talking about good, fresh food that is being wasted on a colossal scale.

Eventually, I set about writing my book⁴, really to demonstrate the extent of this problem on a global scale. [...]

Supermarkets are an easy place to start. This is the result of my hobby, which is unofficial bin inspections.
25 (*Laughter*) Strange you might think, but if we could rely on corporations to tell us what they were doing in the back of their stores, we wouldn’t need to go sneaking around the back, opening up bins and having a look at what’s inside. But this is what you can see more or less on every street corner in Britain, in Europe, in North America. It represents a colossal waste of food, but what I discovered whilst I was writing my book was that this very evident abundance of waste was actually the tip of the iceberg. When you start going up
30 the supply chain, you find where the real food waste is happening on a gargantuan scale.

¹ *haemorrhaging out*: styrtblødte

² angivelse

³ *beyond the pale*: (her) uspiseligt

⁴ “Waste. Uncovering the Global Food Waste Scandal” (2009)

Can I have a show of hands if you have a loaf of sliced bread in your house? Who lives in a household where that crust – that slice at the first and last end of each loaf – who lives in a household where it does get eaten? Okay, most people, not everyone, but most people, and this is, I'm glad to say, what I see across the world, and yet has anyone seen a supermarket or sandwich shop anywhere in the world that serves
35 sandwiches with crusts on it? (*Laughter*) I certainly haven't. So I kept on thinking, "Where do those crusts go?" (*Laughter*) This is the answer, unfortunately: 13,000 slices of fresh bread coming out of this one single factory every single day, day-fresh bread. In the same year that I visited this factory, I went to Pakistan, where people in 2008 were going hungry as a result of a squeeze⁵ on global food supplies. We contribute to that squeeze by depositing food in bins here in Britain and elsewhere in the world. We take food off the
40 market shelves that hungry people depend on.

Go one step up, and you get to farmers, who throw away sometimes a third or even more of their harvest because of cosmetic standards. This farmer, for example, has invested 16,000 pounds in growing spinach, not one leaf of which he harvested, because there was a little bit of grass growing in amongst it. Potatoes that are cosmetically imperfect, all going for pigs. Parsnips that are too small for supermarket
45 specifications, tomatoes in Tenerife, oranges in Florida, bananas in Ecuador, where I visited last year, all being discarded. This is one day's waste from one banana plantation in Ecuador. All being discarded, perfectly edible, because they're the wrong shape or size.

If we do that to fruit and vegetables, you bet we can do it to animals too. Liver, lungs, heads, tails, kidneys, testicles, all of these things which are traditional, delicious and nutritious parts of our gastronomy go to
50 waste. Offal consumption has halved in Britain and America in the last 30 years. As a result, this stuff gets fed to dogs at best, or is incinerated. This man, in Kashgar, Xinjiang province, in Western China, is serving up his national dish. It's called sheep's organs. It's delicious, it's nutritious, and as I learned when I went to Kashgar, it symbolizes their taboo against food waste. I was sitting in a roadside cafe. A chef came to talk to me, I finished my bowl, and halfway through the conversation, he stopped talking and he started frowning
55 into my bowl. I thought, "My goodness, what taboo have I broken? How have I insulted my host?" He pointed at three grains of rice at the bottom of my bowl, and he said, "Clean." (*Laughter*) I thought, "My God, you know, I go around the world telling people to stop wasting food. This guy has thrashed me at my own game." (*Laughter*)

But it gave me faith. It gave me faith that we, the people, do have the power to stop this tragic waste of
60 resources if we regard it as socially unacceptable to waste food on a colossal scale, if we make noise about it, tell corporations about it, tell governments we want to see an end to food waste, we do have the power to bring about that change. [...]

A silver lining: It has kicked off globally, the quest to tackle food waste. "Feeding the 5,000" is an event I
65 first organized in 2009. We fed 5,000 people all on food that otherwise would have been wasted. Since then, it's happened again in London, it's happening internationally, and across the country. It's a way of organizations coming together to celebrate food, to say the best thing to do with food is to eat and enjoy it, and to stop wasting it. For the sake of the planet we live on, for the sake of our children, for the sake of all the other organisms that share our planet with us, we are a terrestrial animal, and we depend on our land for food. At the moment, we are trashing our land to grow food that no one eats. Stop wasting food. Thank
70 you very much. (*Applause*)

(2012)

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