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Feeding the World: A Challenge for the Twenty-First Century

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## **Review: Feeding the World: A Challenge for the Twenty-First Century**

By Vaclav Smil

Reviewed by [Michele Calloway](#)  
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Smil, Vaclav. *Feeding the World: A Challenge for the Twenty-First Century*.  
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. 360 pp. ISBN 0-262-19432-5 (hardcover).  
US\$32.95

The question as to how to feed the world has been greatly debated for decades. Vaclav Smil has tried to reach the middle ground between those who believe that human ingenuity will provide boundless food supplies and those who feel we are near maximum human population. He outlines strategies in agriculture and food consumption to provide for continued population growth. A Distinguished Professor of Geography at the University of Manitoba, Canada, Smil has written numerous works on the topics of agriculture, energy and the environment.

In the area of agriculture, Smil emphasizes the importance of improving soil conditions, and the reduction of erosion and post harvest losses. He advocates increased use of the techniques of conservation tillage, contour plowing, and the covering of soil with crop residues, along with continued research into fertilization and proper crop rotations. Smil states that "only our continuing mismanagement will weaken our food production capacity" (66).

Smil advocates an omnivorous diet, due to the efficient way animal proteins are converted to energy by human. He makes the case that the most efficient animal proteins would be dairy, eggs, poultry, pork, and non-carnivorous fish. Our priority, according to the author, should be to maximize feeding efficiencies of livestock in order to reduce their impact on the environment. This would include improving the processing of feeds, and continued improvement in supplementation of feeds in order to improve conversion efficiencies.

The author asserts that, there is not accurate data on the amount of food that people actually use and need. Smil concludes that inaccuracies in these two areas of human food consumption greatly impact any calculations that one could make regarding the number of people the earth can feed. Instead of waiting for accurate numbers Smil wants to promote general dietary guidelines to encourage a rational diet.

*Feeding the World* is a thorough and well-written treatment, of what will

continue to be a topic of concern for many years. In addition to the text, the author provides an extensive list of references, a useful index, and many illustrative tables and graphs. This book will be of interest to scholars and informed lay people interested in modern agricultural practices, human ecology, and food supply.

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