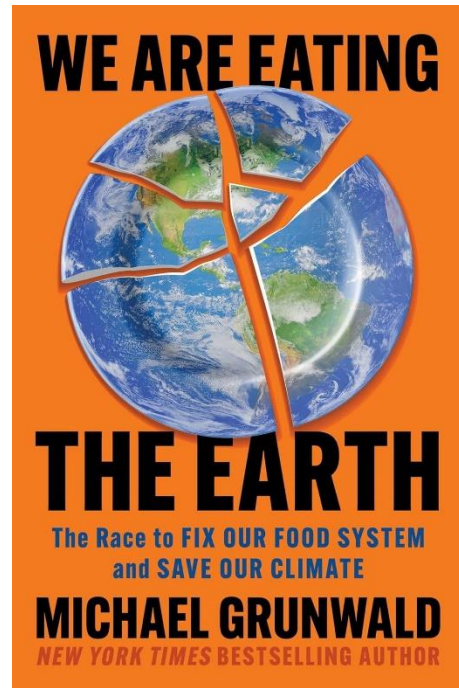


Food production and the limits of sustainability

Book review by

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Review of *We Are Eating the Earth: The Race to Fix Our Food System and Save Our Climate*, by Michael Grunwald. (2025). Published by Simon and Schuster. Available as hardcover, paperback, eBook, and audiobook; 384 pages. Publisher's website: <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/We-Are-Eating-the-Earth/Michael-Grunwald/9781982160074>



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Michael Grunwald's book *We Are Eating the Earth: The Race to Fix Our Food System and Save Our Climate* delves into the ugly world of food production and its detrimental impact on the environment. The book explores the different technologies that have been invented to address the problems caused by the need to produce more food. Grunwald follows the life and the research of a former environmental lawyer, Tim Searchinger. It

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is through the extensive work of Searchinger that Grunwald was compelled to pen this book. Some of the key themes that stem from this reading are the ethicality of science in pushing certain ideas as being environmentally friendly, as well as the clash between experts and environmental advocates and land usage and food production challenges. The reading makes one aware that land use challenges may be far-reaching, in the sense that demand in one area may create land exploitation in a place far from where the demand is.

To address the issue of moving away from fossil fuels in the quest to produce more food, the author explores some of the fuels that have been

hailed by scientists, law-makers, and newspapers as being the “elixirs” to the fossil fuel problem. He goes into detail about how harmful ethanol production from corn is. He points out that one of the misconceptions about fuel production is that there is “free land” somewhere waiting to be used. Grunwald argues that the conversion of corn to fuel will have many perverse outcomes, some of which include increased deforestation, food shortages, and even greater pollution from using ethanol as a fuel. The second fuel he looks at is biomass. It seems that when biomass was proposed as an alternative fuel, there was a notion that it would not be emitting any harmful gases into the atmosphere, such that the Kyoto protocol agreed to it being left out of carbon accounting. It is evident throughout the book that researchers and economists sometimes manipulate the numbers and research to project an image that they are in favor of.

To bring the argument closer to food production, the author also looks at the other alternatives that can serve as substitutes for the food we eat. Grunwald takes us through various inventions, from chickenless eggs to lab-engineered meat. He argues that although these may help in averting climate disaster caused by animal farming, there is still a lot of work to be done to sway people to change their diets. It is also interesting how these technologies are always hailed as being the answers to our climate problems, and yet the inventors do not really want to share their knowledge and are

always ready to sue whoever they think is stealing their idea. This makes it very clear that sustainability is important, but it requires significant financial and resource commitments. To elucidate this further, almost all the examples of startup companies that worked with these inventions required millions of dollars, and most of them were based in the U.S. This already points to the jarring difference between the haves and the have-nots in the research and implementation of sustainable inventions or ideas.

Essentially, Grunwald is challenging scientists and researchers—and everybody else who does work in food production—to dig deeper and find better solutions to the impending problem of destroying the earth. Prior to reading this book, I had never really thought much about how my eating habits may be destroying the planet, but this book has made me think deeper about that. This book challenges the notion of groupthink. Tim Searchinger was willing to question some of the solutions that most people were celebrating and touting as the ultimate answers. This teaches us the importance of being able to think beyond what we see, and that sometimes, as we do that, we may be labeled as being negative. Finally, Grunwald expresses that it is everyone’s responsibility to ensure that we meet our current demands and leave the world a better place for those yet to be born, which is the core message of sustainable development. 