

Review

Community connectedness and sustainable eatingMichela Lenzi¹, Andrea Scatolon¹, Luciana Carraro¹,
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Climate change and resource depletion threaten both humanity and ecosystems. Reduction in meat consumption is a key sustainable action, and identifying its determinants can play a crucial role in shaping effective climate change strategies. This review explores how community connectedness can influence sustainable eating and identifies potential factors shaping this relationship. Research on sustainable eating mainly examines individual factors. However, meat consumption is deeply rooted in social and cultural contexts, making change difficult. Community connectedness may both promote and hinder sustainable eating by reinforcing local dietary traditions. Although community connectedness may encourage protection of local environments and pro-environmental behaviors such as local food consumption, it may also reinforce meat-heavy culinary traditions. Since meat consumption is embedded in cultural and historical traditions globally, a strong connection to one's community may hinder the adoption of more environmentally friendly diets – particularly when these traditions emphasize resource-heavy foods like meat. However, collective community efforts can promote sustainable diets: research indicates that strong community ties can support initiatives promoting plant-based diets with minimal animal products. Initiatives like community-based pledges, cooking courses, and community-supported agriculture can encourage plant-based diets, and foster long-term habits through education, socialization, and community-driven support. Empirical evidence also shows that the potential for community connectedness to promote sustainable eating might depend on intervening factors like environmental awareness and a broader sense of connection to nature. Future research should further explore how local and global connectedness shape sustainable eating and evaluate the effectiveness of community-based interventions aimed at promoting pro-

environmental diets, to develop culturally appropriate strategies for sustainable eating.

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Anthropogenic climate change and the continuous degradation of non-renewable resources represent major threats to both nonhuman living beings and human survival itself [1]. Despite an international consensus to combat global warming and preserve natural resources, sustainability targets have thus far remained unattained. Given that human actions are the primary driver of many environmental crises [2], it is crucial to understand what promotes or hinders pro-environmental behavior (PEB), which is a form of prosocial behavior motivated by concern for nature's well-being [3] and aimed at reversing or minimizing the detrimental effects of human activity on the planet [4].

A lack of recognition of the interconnectedness between the natural world and humanity might be at the core of the failure to achieve environmental goals [5]. Indeed, for an individual's prosocial tendencies to be expressed in a particular domain (e.g., pro-environmental), a sense of connection to that domain is required [3,6]. The local community may serve as the context in which the consequences of our actions are most evident and easily observed, making it a key arena for understanding and promoting PEB. Consistently, research indicates that a sense of connectedness to the community tends to promote PEB [7,8], likely because the emotional attachment to a place and the people living in it fosters the motivation to protect it [6]. A recent meta-analysis [9] showed that place attachment has a positive overall influence on PEB, with a moderately strong effect.

Despite emerging consensus in the literature on the role of community connectedness in promoting pro-environmental actions, some findings remain inconsistent. These inconsistencies may be attributable to other factors that moderate the effects of connectedness. For

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example, the association tends to be stronger in collectivist cultures than in individualist ones and is more pronounced when linked to place-specific measures of PEB [9]. Additionally, the diversity of sustainable behaviors that are studied may contribute to these discrepancies, as each behavior presents unique characteristics that can determine its most significant predictors.

One of the most impactful actions individuals can take to lower their climate footprint is to reduce their consumption of meat - a key feature of what has been defined as a sustainable diet [10]. Understanding its determinants could therefore contribute to the development of effective strategies to combat climate change. However, dietary habits result from a complex interplay of factors that only partially overlap with other PEBs. Community connectedness, in particular, encompasses unique aspects rooted in the cultural foundations of dietary choices, which could play a critical role in understanding sustainable food choices, but these influences remain largely underexplored [11]. This manuscript reviews the latest relevant literature to understand how connectedness to community influences sustainable eating - both by promoting and hindering it - and discusses potential factors that may shape this relationship. By bridging research on pro-environmental behavior, place-based identity, and food systems, this review offers an integrative perspective on the role of community bonds in dietary sustainability.

Sustainable eating: the role of contextual factors

Current eating patterns are environmentally unsustainable, exerting substantial pressure on the planet by consuming approximately 70% of fresh water [12], contributing nearly one-third of all human-induced greenhouse gas emissions [13], and driving biodiversity loss [14]. Since food demand is shaped by individuals' dietary choices, a collective change in eating habits could decrease demand for unsustainable products, paving the way toward a more sustainable food system [15]. In this review, we adopt an operational definition of sustainable eating as reducing meat consumption and increasing the intake of plant-based foods. Although definitions vary across sources [16,17], this perspective aligns with renowned dietary models such as the EAT-Lancet diet [18].

The literature on the determinants of sustainable eating has primarily focused on individual factors such as food motives (e.g., health, animal ethics, and/or sustainability), emotions (e.g., disgust and guilt), awareness of the consequences associated with different diets and taste (for a meta-review, see: [11]), or general intentions to adopt pro-environmental behavior [19]. Although eating meat often holds a strong social, cultural, and contextual

significance [20,21], our understanding of its impacts is still limited, and further research is needed. From a sociocultural perspective, there is considerable resistance to changing meat consumption, as many food cultures and traditions reinforce meat's status as a powerful cultural symbol [22] and a masculinity marker [23], possibly outweighing individual motivations or mindsets that favor reducing meat consumption. For this reason, community connectedness in this context might also discourage sustainable eating, by reinforcing the link to meat-based culinary traditions, thus making it particularly important to understand its role in shaping food choices.

The following sections will review studies that examined the association between a sense of connectedness to the community and sustainable eating.

Community connectedness and sustainable eating

Community connectedness refers to individuals' subjective experience of belonging and relatedness to their local community. In psychology, this concept has been operationalized in various ways. Constructs such as *place attachment* [24] emphasize the emotional and symbolic meaning of a physical location, while *sense of community* [25], *social capital* [26] and *collective efficacy* [27] primarily focus on the quality of relationships and the social resources that arise from them within the community. In this work, we use the term *community connectedness* to capture both an emotional bond with a place and a sense of connection with its members, fostering collaboration toward shared goals. Below, we review both the inhibiting and promoting roles of community connectedness in shaping sustainable food choices, highlighting how this connection can influence individuals' dietary behaviors in complex ways.

As shown by theory and empirical evidence on PEBs [9], a sense of attachment to the local community and its members should encourage behaviors protecting the place, thus benefiting people living in the same community. This might include adopting a sustainable diet by reducing meat consumption. At the same time, a strong emotional connection to a place can encourage local food consumption, which is often regarded as more sustainable, healthier, and fresher [28]. A recent bibliometric analysis by Makhal et al. [29] identified a strong link between place attachment and local food consumption. However, although eating local food can reduce transportation emissions, this does not always translate into adopting sustainable diets. While consuming local foods is often seen as environmentally friendly, its link to reduced meat consumption is not clear-cut. Some studies suggest that people who buy local foods tend to eat more plant-based foods (e.g., Ref. [30]), while others find a connection between local food purchasing and higher red meat consumption,

driven by factors like supporting the local economy or seeking freshness [31]. However, local food systems often offer more seasonal plant-based options, and meat is usually sourced from smaller-scale, less intensive farming systems [32]. So, while eating local may not directly reduce meat consumption, it can still support a more sustainable, plant-forward diet overall. Alongside these mixed findings, there is a scarcity of research on the relationship between community connectedness and local food consumption outside the context of tourism and hospitality.

Conversely, since meat intake is rooted in both cultural and historical traditions around the world (e.g., Ref. [33]), feeling strongly attached to a community and its traditions might also represent a barrier to adopting eco-friendly food choices, especially when these traditions prioritize foods that are resource-intensive, such as meat or dairy [34]. Indeed, a sense of attachment to the culinary traditions of that community might derive from and be reinforced by community connectedness, especially in countries where food has important cultural implications. Although, to our knowledge, no studies have specifically investigated this potential mechanism at the local community-level, findings of a recent study focused on national identification support this possibility. Indeed, a strong and consistent association between national identification and meat consumption was found in Nguyen and Platow's study [35] involving American, British, and Australian participants. Individuals strongly identifying with their nation had more positive attitudes toward meat, intended to consume more meat, and were less inclined to eat vegetarian meals. These findings were specific to countries with high meat consumption levels, and similar effects may not be observed in nations with lower meat consumption or when accounting for connectedness to the local community. It is also possible that other psychological drivers linked to a strong national identity (such as social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism) affect this association [36].

On a local level, evidence also exists in favor of a positive contribution of community connectedness to encouraging sustainable eating. Klöckner et al. [37] identified the neighborhood as a key arena for climate action, emphasizing the role of collective, cultural, and socio-structural factors in shaping the adoption of a sustainable diet. The study found that neighborhood social capital and pro-environmental social norms positively influenced collective intentions to reduce animal product consumption and increase plant-based food consumption. These collective intentions, in turn, had a small but meaningful effect on encouraging the adoption of a more sustainable diet and other PEBs. These findings suggest that framing climate action as a collective effort, creating spaces for community engagement, and emphasizing the greater impact of acting together can enhance eco-friendly practices.

The importance of emphasizing the collective nature of climate action also emerged in Di Poce's research [38], in which collective efficacy related to climate change was manipulated through a fictitious newspaper article claiming that humans can (versus cannot) solve climate change through collective effort. The results showed that higher levels of perceived collective efficacy led to an increased adoption of sustainable diets. Similarly, Jones and collaborators [39] investigated the psychological factors that motivate individuals to adopt sustainable diets through relational organizing—a strategy used in activism and community engagement that focuses on developing personal relationships to build power and mobilize people toward common goals. Participants belonging to communities engaged in relational organizing, along with their sense of personal responsibility and belief in the effectiveness of their actions, significantly increased the adoption of climate-friendly behaviors, including more sustainable diets.

Is the local community a key setting for interventions promoting sustainable diets?

Community connectedness does not seem to automatically promote sustainable eating; in fact, it has the potential to both discourage and encourage sustainable diets. The existing evidence on its role is limited but promising, suggesting that it can be leveraged to implement effective community-based initiatives promoting plant-rich diets with minimal animal products. In a campaign engaging community stakeholders in a New York county, plant-based diets were promoted through multiple channels (e.g., social media, local press), while participating households pledged to abstain from meat one day per week for 12 weeks [40]. The six-month follow-up revealed that after taking part in this short-term pledge to reduce meat consumption, more than half of the participants reported eating less meat, indicating the development of a long-term habit. Similarly, in the "Digimat" project [41] - a free digital cooking course aimed at promoting sustainable and healthy eating in people experiencing mental health problems - nearly 90% of participants reported reducing their consumption of processed and red meats while increasing their intake of plant-based foods. The project included practical cooking sessions aimed at strengthening participants' culinary skills, thereby fostering greater enjoyment and confidence in cooking while increasing awareness of sustainable nutrition. Additionally, the courses served as an important opportunity for socialization, as participants shared meals in small groups. This also fostered a sense of community, highlighting its potential as a catalyst for a virtuous cycle between community connectedness and sustainable eating.

These findings are in line with the literature on community-supported agriculture (CSA), a model that strengthens the connections between producers and consumers within local food systems by allowing consumers to subscribe to the harvest of a specific farm or a

collective of farms. A key characteristic of the CSA model is the close integration of production and consumption, with consumers actively participating in farm activities. In a study evaluating different experiences of CSAs in Italy [42], findings indicate that this innovative model can support sustainable food choices through education, engagement, and the creation of alternative food networks that move away from industrialized, high-impact food systems. Through active participation and interaction, members also reported developing solidarity with each other, trust in producers, and increased political awareness.

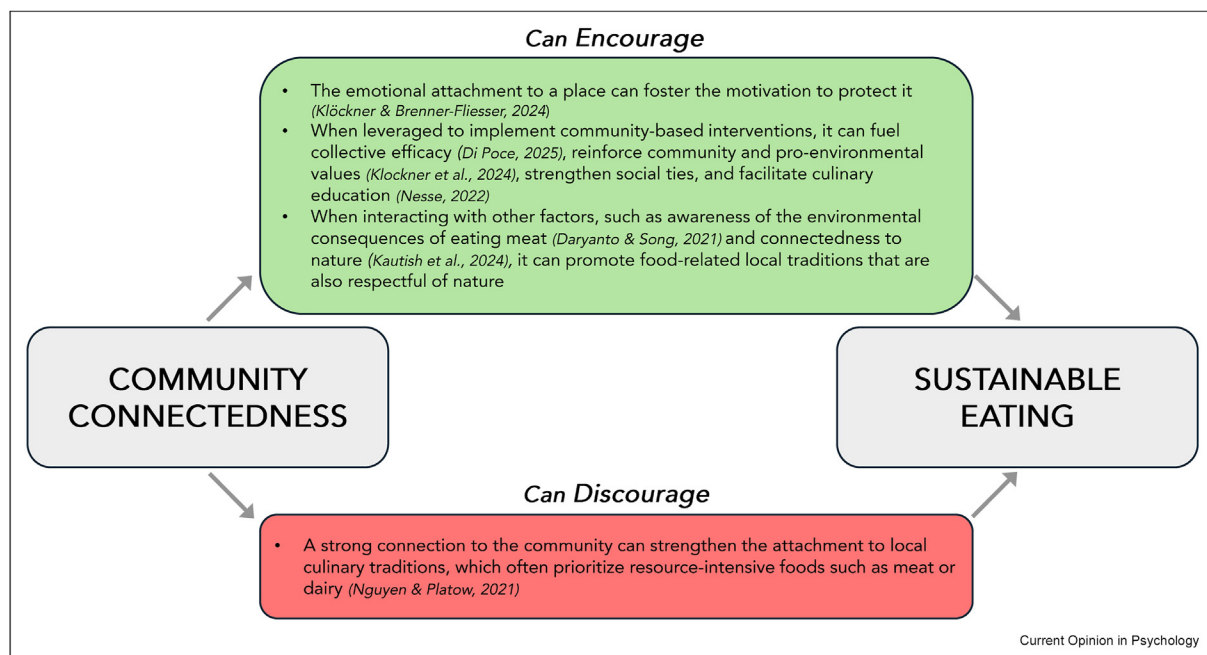
Psychosocial processes and potential intervening factors: connecting the local and the “planetary community”

Overall, the reviewed studies point to the potential of community connectedness for promoting sustainable eating while also emphasizing the complexity of its role. It is possible that, in order for community connectedness to work as a facilitator of sustainable food consumption, some conditions are needed to facilitate the relevant psychosocial processes. According to the literature, several mechanisms might explain the role of the bond to the local community in fostering the adoption of PEBs in general and, more specifically, sustainable diets. First, when feeling a strong connection to a community, individuals tend to be more motivated to protect it, thus contributing to the well-being of its members and,

ultimately, to their own well-being. But this does not seem to work in every circumstance since it likely depends on other intervening factors. First, awareness about the environmental consequences of consuming certain foods and the links to place-specific PEB [9] are likely to strengthen the relationships between one's own actions and environmental goals, thus boosting the influence of community connectedness on decisions to adopt more sustainable diets.

At the same time, the role of connectedness with the local community could be intertwined with the sense of connection and belonging to a broader community — that is, the connection with nature. Our relationship with nature, indeed, seems to have a role in the decision to reduce meat consumption. According to the Biophilia Hypothesis, humans possess an innate propensity to form connections with the natural world and various forms of life on Earth [43]; however, there is interindividual variation in this sense of connection with the natural world [44], including an appreciation for and recognition of the interdependence of all living beings [45]. This bond might represent a key factor in promoting diets that are respectful of the natural world, as shown by a number of studies finding that people who feel more connected to nature tend to adopt diets with a reduced intake of animal-derived products in favor of plant-based foods (e.g., Refs. [46,47]). The potential of community connectedness to promote sustainable

Figure 1



From connection to consumption: how community connectedness can shape sustainable eating.

eating may be strengthened by a sense of belonging to the planetary community, creating a synergistic effect in which caring for the local community and protecting nature intersect and contribute to promoting sustainable eating. When experiencing a strong connection at both local and global levels, people might be encouraged to embrace food-related local traditions that are also respectful of nature and develop new, sustainable traditions.

Community-based initiatives to promote sustainable diets might represent one of the main contexts where local and global meet, by allowing people to simultaneously take care of the local community and the planet, while at the same time nurturing their relationships with other members and nature. The belief that it is possible to make a difference when working together may fuel collective and self-efficacy, while reinforcing communal and pro-environmental values. Knowledge about plant-based traditional meals and recipes could be easily transmitted and developed while also allowing new, sustainable traditions to be formed (see Fig. 1). This strategy, which connects traditions and innovations, could effectively encourage sustainable diets among individuals with diverse worldviews or political orientations [48].

Conclusions

Promoting more sustainable diets is a key strategy for reducing human impacts on climate change. Existing literature has mainly focused on individual antecedents, and future studies are needed to better understand the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping dietary habits. In particular, understanding the role of connectedness — both at the local and global levels — should be a priority.

More theoretical work is necessary to identify the reciprocal links between community and nature connectedness, as well as the psychosocial processes that can foster both social cohesion and PEBs [49]. Additionally, new theoretical paradigms of well-being need to be developed, emphasizing that individual, collective, and planetary well-being are interconnected and part of a single, overarching construct. Such frameworks could highlight the immense potential for individuals to enhance their own health while simultaneously prioritizing collective and planetary well-being [50].

Community-based interventions aimed at promoting sustainable diets are among the most promising strategies for mitigating the effects of the climate crisis while also enhancing individual and social well-being. Although many community-based initiatives have been implemented worldwide, they generally lack rigorous evaluations of their effectiveness. Practitioners and policymakers should work to increase the availability of

such opportunities, and further research is needed to identify the key characteristics of effective interventions by implementing strategies that are compatible with local culinary traditions and build upon them to develop new, sustainable practices.

Credit

Michela Lenzi: conceptualization, writing — original draft, writing — review & editing, visualization, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition
Andrea Scatolon: writing — review & editing, visualization
Luciana Carraro: writing — review & editing, funding acquisition
Margherita Guidetti: writing — review & editing, funding acquisition
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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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 - ** of outstanding interest
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 50. Isham A, Morgan G, Kemp AH: **Nurturing wellbeing amidst the climate crisis: on the need for a focus on wellbeing in the field of climate psychology.** *Front Psychol* 2023 Jul 27, 14, 1205991, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1205991>.
- Further information on references of particular interest**
11. The authors conduct a systematic literature review on consumer resistance to the transition towards alternative proteins, which identifies key factors influencing resistance, including taste preferences, cultural values, and perceived health risks. The findings provide insights into overcoming barriers to consumer acceptance of alternative protein sources.
 22. The authors explore the intertwined history of human evolution and meat consumption. They argue that meat has played a crucial role in shaping human biology and culture, influencing dietary practices and social structures throughout history. The authors also discuss how traditional meat consumption has important symbolic meanings in different areas related to gender differences, cooperation and reciprocity, religion, cultural expression and one's identity.
 33. The author examines the cultural and symbolic significance of meat consumption, and argues that meat serves as more than just sustenance: it embodies power, status, and identity within societies. The author explores how these social dimensions influence dietary habits and perceptions of meat across different cultures.
 37. The authors investigate the factors influencing climate actions at the neighborhood level, examining individual, collective, cultural, and socio-structural elements. The study reveals that both neighborhood social capital and pro-environmental social norms play significant roles in motivating climate-friendly behaviors.
 39. The article explores the psychological factors influencing relational organizing, a method in community engagement that emphasizes developing and utilizing personal connections to inspire collective action toward a shared goal, such as for promoting climate-friendly food choices. It identifies key predictors like social norms, and personal responsibility, highlighting how these elements can motivate individuals to encourage others to adopt sustainable diets. The findings offer insights for developing effective interventions to support climate action through social influence.
 46. This study explores how environmental values (i.e., terminal and instrumental values) influence vegan food consumption through the mediating roles of nature connectedness and love for nature. The study finds that both values positively influence nature connectedness, which subsequently promotes love for nature, ultimately leading to stronger intentions to purchase vegan products.