

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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*Field Report*  
**One Day at a Time**  
By Brandon Keim

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## FIELD REPORT

**FOOD FLIGHT:** Visitors to Hong Kong International Airport enjoy vegetarian fare at a launch event for the airport's Green Monday program.

# One Day at a Time

An incremental approach to fostering sustainable eating habits is the hallmark of Green Monday, an organization based in Hong Kong.

BY BRANDON KEIM

**T**en years ago, David Yeung happened to read a United Nations report on climate change that reviewed the carbon footprint of various human activities. Yeung already knew (or so he thought) what the biggest carbon culprits are: the energy sector, heavy industry, transportation. But one fact caught him by surprise. Meat production, as it happens, accounts for an estimated 9 percent of all greenhouse gas pollution—a higher share than all of the world's planes, ships, and automobiles put together.

Yeung, who grew up in Hong Kong, had become a vegetarian while living in New York City in the early 2000s. This new morsel of information gave him a different outlook on his diet. Eating less meat, he realized, isn't only about healthy living or animal welfare. It's also a way—a convenient and practical

way—to help counter rising sea levels, extreme weather, and other catastrophes that affect a warming globe.

Even as veggie-centered diets have become common in the United States and Western Europe, they have largely been an afterthought in Asian countries. Buddhists might shun meat for ethical reasons, and poor people might go meatless out of necessity. But for most people in emerging economies, meat is a mark of prosperity. Indeed, the highest rate of meat consumption in the world can be found in Hong Kong, where people eat more than 300 pounds of meat per capita per year.

In 2012, Yeung cofounded Green Monday, a social enterprise based in Hong Kong that encourages people to eat less meat and that develops ways to support meat-free living. Through its work with more than 1,000 restaurants and about 800 schools in that city, Green Monday has helped cause a dramatic rise in the number of people who identify as at least part-time vegetarians: Today,

23 percent of Hong Kong's 7.2 million residents are in that category; in 2012, it was only 5 percent. Building on that success, Green Monday has expanded internationally. It now has programs in nine countries, including Japan and the United States.

The central feature of Green Monday's approach to social change is implicit in its name. Instead of pursuing an "all day, every day" strategy, Yeung and his colleagues follow an incremental path toward environmental sustainability. "That's the innovation of this," says Yeung. "We don't focus on massive, dramatic change. We're not asking people to make a radical leap in their lifestyle. All we ask for is a baby step."

## STRIKING A BALANCE

For Yeung, an easy option would have been to launch Green Monday as a purely nonprofit initiative. In that way, it would have closely resembled Meatless Monday, a US-based campaign founded in 2003 by public health experts from Columbia, Johns Hopkins, and Syracuse universities. Green Monday, in fact, is part of the Meatless Monday movement, and it uses that campaign's core tactic—the promotion of meat-free eating on the first day of every week. Yet the nonprofit model struck Yeung as too narrow in scope. He wanted to develop the capacity not just for "letting people know what the problems are," but also for offering "alternatives," he says: "Besides changing demand via knowledge and education, we also need to change supply."

Ultimately, Yeung arrived at an organizational structure in which nonprofit and for-profit elements complement each other. The Green Monday Foundation, a nonprofit entity, focuses on education and awareness building. It provides information and advice to schools, restaurants, and companies that join the Green Monday movement. One such partner is Café de Coral, the largest fast-food restaurant company in Hong Kong. On the for-profit side, there are two entities. Green Monday Ventures invests in startup enterprises such as Green Common, a vegetarian supermarket that has two locations, both in Hong Kong. And Green Monday Solutions is a



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consulting business that helps clients implement sustainability initiatives. Those clients include Credit Suisse, Google, and the Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA).

HKIA offers an instructive example: Serving more than 63 million passengers every year, it is the world's 10th busiest airport, and in 2012 its senior managers pledged to make it the world's greenest. Just how the airport and its 65,000 employees would fulfill that ambitious mandate wasn't immediately clear. Making the task easier was a network of sustainability-minded people that Green Monday helped to establish within the airport. "We found staff [members] who wanted to be green, and this created a platform for them to do that," says Mike Kilburn, senior manager for environmental programs at HKIA. "We were shaping the environmental DNA of the organization."

Green Monday jump-started that process by persuading HKIA's 60 restaurants to expand their vegetarian fare on Mondays. Crucially, the Green Monday team doesn't ask restaurant operators to remove meat from their menus altogether. The goal, rather, is to reduce the amount of meat that they serve. "We're not forcing. We're engaging and collaborating," says Kilburn.

That's a consistent theme for Green Monday in both its nonprofit and its for-profit operations: Food service providers are welcome to keep meat on their menu, but Green Monday urges them to add vegetarian options and to provide diners with information on the environmental consequences of carnivorous behavior. This soft-sell method, Yeung believes, is far more effective than telling people not to eat meat. "It's Psychology 101: Never ask people to do something using a negative approach," he says.

The soft-sell method also has the benefit of making vegetarian fare more palatable to institutional partners. At Washington University, which launched a Green Monday campaign at its campus in St. Louis in early 2015, previous Meatless Monday initiatives had met with resistance. "There was concern about removing meat totally or restricting consumer choice," says Phil Valko, assistant

vice chancellor for sustainability at the university. In its partnership with Green Monday, Washington University adopted a strategy that focuses on increasing awareness and providing options. "We went from strong skepticism of Meatless Monday to really strong buy-in for Green Monday," Valko says.

#### SENDING A MESSAGE

Much of Green Monday's work involves marketing and outreach. Yeung and his colleagues put a lot of effort into cultivating media contacts and celebrity ambassadors—including fashion models and pop music artists—and into crafting advertising campaigns that aim to make vegetarian fare appealing. "We can't just say, 'Eating meat is no good for the planet,'" says Francis Ngai, cofounder of Green Monday and CEO of Social Ventures Hong Kong, a venture philanthropy firm that incubated Green Monday. "Instead, we make it a culture. It's trendy. It's an attitude."

Theresa Orr, vice chair of Give2Asia, a nonprofit that supports philanthropic work in Asia, lauds Green Monday's messaging. "When we advocate for doing nonprofit work better, we tell people: You have to treat it as a business. You need to take on the marketing, the PR, the branding," she says. "Green Monday does a marvelous job with that."

Trends are ephemeral, though, and one challenge for Green Monday and its partners involves turning an initial burst of attention into something durable. "Green Monday did the big launch very well. What's harder is maintaining momentum, month after month," says Kilburn. "It's a job that requires boots on the ground."

Long-term consumer engagement is just one area where Green Monday must confront the potential limitations of its model. The movement is certainly open to criticism. Its messaging downplays concerns about animal welfare—a topic that Yeung cares about deeply—and it avoids issues like pesticide use and farm worker welfare. Yet a more antagonistic approach, says Yeung, might discourage companies from partnering with Green Monday. He also notes that Green Monday partners emphasize issues

like animal welfare in their own campaigns. In late 2015, for instance, Humane Society International launched a Green Monday program in South Africa.

Impact evaluation is another area of concern for Green Monday. The impact data that the organization cites are impressive but also somewhat fuzzy: How many of the 23 percent of Hong Kong residents who report part-time vegetarian habits have actually altered their behavior in response to Green Monday efforts? And what effect, if any, do those efforts have on overall meat consumption? (In theory, people who go vegetarian on Monday might compensate for that behavior by eating more meat on other days.) As yet, neither Green Monday nor its partners collect data that could answer those questions.

Research on how people change behavior, however, suggests that the Green Monday approach may have merit. That approach depends on generating intrinsic motivation—the type of motivation that leads people to take action not in order to impress other people, but for its own sake. "One of the strongest tools we have is to build people's self-perception. If you see yourself as the kind of person who eats vegetarian, that [motivation is] more sustainable," says Jennifer Tabanico, an experimental psychologist who is president of Action Research, a company that helps clients promote behavior change.

According to Ngai, anecdotal evidence indicates that Green Monday is successfully tapping into this kind of motivation. "There's no research yet, but we did ask people" about their non-Monday eating habits, he says. This feedback suggests that many Green Monday participants end up eating less meat throughout the week. Still, Ngai acknowledges the need for more rigorous impact evaluation.

Gathering hard data about the effectiveness of its soft-sell approach will be especially important as Green Monday widens its scope of operations. In the future, Yeung and his team intend to focus not only on the climate and resource effects of meat consumption, but also on issues such as food waste and recycling. "Ultimately," says Yeung, "what we're trying to do is to create a green economy." ■