

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/in-brief/immediate-impact-through-entrepreneurship/>

Impossible Foods Founder and CEO Patrick Brown discusses how his decision to leave academia and become an entrepreneur was based on his passion to make the greatest impact he possibly could with his work. He says launching a business wasn't his first instinct for addressing the environmental harm caused by cattle, but he realized a startup was the quickest way to get a solution to market and gauge success.



Transcript

- I never define myself as a biochemistry professor or something like that, it just happened to be what I was doing at the time.. And I always felt like I wanted to do the most important and impactful, meaningful thing that I can do given the things that I know how to do.. And for a long while it was trying to develop a better basic understanding of the fundamental mechanisms that keeps cells alive and how genes work and stuff like that.. Both as pure knowledge and also because that's kind of like the foundation for being able to develop better ways of treating and diagnosing disease and so forth.. So I thought, okay, that's pretty impactful.. And I was happy doing that.. But I had a sabbatical and I had the opportunity to basically just step back for a minute and ask myself, okay, what right now is the most important problem in the world that I can potentially contribute to solving.. And I realized very quickly the most important and urgent problem in the world, in my very strong opinion, full stop, is the destructive impact of our use of animals as food production technology.. Which, not just according to me, but according to the U.N Environmental Program and many other environmental scientists, is by a big margin the most environmentally destructive technology on Earth.. And so, okay, that's easy..

So that's the problem.. And it took me a while to come around to realizing that the solution involves starting a business.. In fact, when I got into that thought process it was like the farthest thing from my mind.. But I realized that no one was taking this seriously as a solvable problem.. I even went to the COP21 conference two years ago and it was all these people who live and breathe climate change.. And not a word, I basically I think was the only person in the entire city of Paris who was talking about the animals in our food system as a major cause of climate change.. And yet, if you talked to anyone there they'd say, yeah, of course, it really is.. But it was on no one's agenda.. Why? Because for billions of people around the world, the foods that we get from animals are such an important part of the pleasure of living that it's too much of a stretch to contemplate basically leaving those foods behind.. Even for people who live and breathe these kind of environmental issues..

And so you have this dilemma that billions of people and rapidly increasing demand for these foods and the way we're making them is completely unscalable.. I mean the magnitude of the environmental impact, don't get me started but, is humongous.. How do you solve that dilemma? You basically separate the things that people demand and desire, which is the functional properties of these foods.. Flavor, all the things that you love about those foods.. From the way we make them and I felt like, okay, actually if you do that, that's a solvable problem.. And that what it enables you to do is that it should be possible to do is create products that outperform in every way that consumers care about.. The products that we get from animals much more sustainably.. Basically deconstructing the problem and making these products directly from plant ingredients.. And if we'd then just put 'em on the market.. And let the market work..

Let consumers make the choice and it's on us to make a product that's so good that people choose it over the existing products.. But if we can pull that off, we solve the problem.. And at potentially a very fast pace.. We set out target as basically, this is our internal strategic target.. We want to effectively completely replace the use of animals as a food production technology by 2035.. And I think that the only way you can do that, the only system fast enough to make that happen, is the market and products that outperform..