The Local Food Solution

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Why buying food locally is better for our health, our environment, and our community.

As Americans, we feel strongly about our food. We like to know the ingredients and the nutritional information. We like to know when to eat it by, how to prepare it, and the recommended amount to eat. However, there are two important questions that we usually fail to ask about our food: Where does it come from? How did it get to us? Since the globalization of the produce market after World War II, most of the food available in grocery stores and super markets today is not “local” food. In 2001, an estimated 39 percent of fruits, 12 percent of vegetables, 40 percent of lamb, and 78 percent of fish and shellfish that Americans ate was produced in other countries (Pirog & Benjamin, 2003, p. 8). In fact, the produce available in an average United States grocery store travels nearly...
1,500 miles between the original farm and our refrigerators ("The Issues: Buy Local," 2008).

The economic theory of global foods calls for each separate region to specialize in the commodities that can be produced most efficiently and inexpensively. Each region can then trade their unique commodities globally and purchase other regions’ products for local use (Norberg-Hodge & Gorlick, 2008). Yet, because one area focuses on producing a single crop or livestock, Rich Pirog (2004) describes the system as encouraging “a separation between land and people, between farm and city, and plant/animal growth and human ob-

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Most Americans are not even conscious of the ways in which the globalization of food affects them, and they continue to support the international food market every day. Either misinformed, uninspired, or limited in resources, Americans have essentially lost grasp of the consequences of their food choices; by choosing locally grown food, we can invest in and improve the environment, the local economy, and our personal health.

The rise in the global food market has had tremendous impacts on the Earth. Industrial farms create a great demand for
petroleum. The Institute of Science and Society reports that 17 percent of petroleum demand in the US goes towards industrial “mega-farms” for crop production and transportation, producing fertilizer and pesticides, and processing food to increase shelf life (Sweely, 2008). In more intimate farming situations, these sources of petroleum are limited or entirely non-existent. Therefore, the most obvious environmental destruction is related to the consumption of petroleum and its harmful emissions, notably in the ways that food is transported great distances. Food transportation represents over 20 percent of all commodity transport in the United States, and it results in more than 120 million tons of carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions every year. In the atmosphere, these materials contribute to air pollution, global warming and acid rain. (“The Issues: Buy Local,” 2008). Pete Anderson, a University of Wisconsin-Madison lecturer in nutritional sciences, believes that eating food produced “as locally as possible” is the most important step that we can take to reduce energy expenditure and carbon dioxide output (Evans, 2008, p. 5). Locally grown food does not need to travel nearly as far from farm to market, so significantly less greenhouse gases are emitted in its transportation.

Further, since most produce is largely composed of water, it requires constant refrigeration to prevent spoilage (Evans, 2008, p. 7). This refrigeration requires extra energy, emitting more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. As the time between harvest and shelving increases, larger amounts of paper and plastic packaging are needed to keep food fresh, which eventually becomes un-recyclable waste (“The Issues: Buy Local,” 2008). Locally grown food does not require excessive refrigeration or packaging, reducing both carbon dioxide output and trash in landfills across the nation.

The farming methods characteristic to global industrial farms are directly
harmful to the Earth. Often, in an attempt to produce massive amounts of one crop, global farms create giant monocultures, cultivating a single organism over a great area and reducing the biodiversity of the land. These monocultures can exhaust the soil’s nutrients, eventually forcing these large farms to completely abandon the exhausted land (Norberg-Hodge & Gorlick, 2008). Although this way of producing food is devastating to the ecology of an area, Michael Pollan (2009) renowned author, activist, and professor, points out that unfortunately “‘ecologically’ is no longer the operative standard… [because] time is money, and yield is everything” (p. 804). Industrial farms make a profit by producing large quantities of food, not by protecting the biodiversity of the land.

These large specialized farms also require massive input of pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilizers that – besides being dangerous to human health – erode soil, chemically and ecologically alter waterways, deoxygenate large bodies of water, and poison the surrounding ecosystems (Norberg-Hodge & Gorelick, 2008). Pol-
lan (2009) maintains that the flood of synthetic nitrogen has fertilized “not just the farm fields but the forests and the oceans, too” (p. 804). By fertilizing our farms, we have fertilized the world; we have altered the planet’s composition of species and shrunk the biodiversity, altering the relationships and roles that each organism plays in the ecosystem.

Aside from the environmental impacts, global foods have altered the economy; the massive crop output of industrial farms has reduced the economical demand for traditional, small farms.

According to The International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC), the number of farmers has steadily declined as farms have become larger (Norberg-Hodge & Gorelick, 2008). The six founding countries of Europe’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) had 22 million farmers in 1957; today that number has fallen to about seven million, representing a massive amount of people who have lost their land, their source of income, their job, and, in some cases, a family tradition of stewardship for the land (Norberg-Hodge & Gorelick, 2008).

Even for those who can manage to keep their jobs, the global food system hurts farmers by cutting their income; the farmers themselves do not receive most of the money consumers spend on conventional produce. In the US grocery stores, for example, distributors, marketers, and input suppliers take ninety one cents of every food dollar, while farmers keep the remainder (Norberg-Hodge & Gorlick, 2008). Buying locally ensures that farmers receive a much larger portion of the revenue, which they tend to reinvest into local businesses for their agriculture needs. In the end, this cycle benefits the local economy twice as much as buying from a grocery store chain.

Besides affecting the environment and the economy, global foods have impacted the nutrition of produce available in the supermarket. Before the specialized mega-farms, crops had to be rotated regularly to prevent nutrient deficient soil. Today, however, industrial farming techniques require little crop rotation, using specialized soil that contains only a few essential nutrients. Yet, plants cannot synthesize minerals that are absent from the soil; consequentially, these plants
contain an extremely limited nutrient profile ("Nutrient Deficiencies," 2008). In addition, excessive pesticide use, characteristic to mega-farms, reduces a plant’s ability to take in nutrients from the soil.

Non-local food loses even more nutrients in premature harvest and processing to increase shelf life (Sweely, 2008). In anticipation of transportation and storage, industrial farms pick fruits and vegetables early to prevent over ripening and spoilage; sometimes, they use specific gases to artificially manipulate the ripening timeline ("Nutrient Deficiencies," 2008). After multiple-day transportation, the produce lacks vitamins and phytonutrients, a plant substance that provides protective health benefits. By contrast, local food is often harvested at peak ripeness and sold just a day or two later.

On the level of the individual’s health, buying local food would improve the average American diet. According to Eric Schlosser (2009) in "Why McDonalds Fries Taste So Good," “about ninety percent of the money that Americans now spend on food goes to buy processed food" (p. 529). Shopping at farmer’s markets would limit the volume of junk food in America’s diet, replacing it with local meat, fish, dairy products, fruits, and vegetables. Furthermore, people would eat a more varied diet, largely dependent on the limited seasonal availability of these products. Forced to adapt our diet throughout the year, we would gain a greater appreciation of the seasons, the land, and lesser known fruits and vegetables.

Finally, we underestimate the power of the holistic experience of buying and eating local food to connect us to the land and each other. Shopping at a farmer’s market or gathering fresh produce from a private garden is an entirely different experience than pushing a steel cart through aisles of processed foods illuminated by fluorescent overhead lights. To shake the hand of the farmer who has personally worked since the early spring to grow the fruits and vegetables he or she is selling is to understand a story and appreciate the farmer, the land, and the food itself. For most, farming is not only a job; it is an identity and a way of life. There is a commitment to the quality, a sense of integrity and pride of ownership that does not exist in any grocery store. When we move between stands in a farmer’s market or till the soil behind our houses, we appreciate all that goes into just one fruit or vegetable; we appreciate our reliance on the earth for sustenance and health. By understanding the source of our food, we can not only be healthier, we can feel healthier. We can begin to grasp the complex relationship between man and earth, seasons and weather, understanding that we both support and are supported by the earth, and striving for symbiotic relationship that is mutually beneficial.

Overall, there is clear research to support the benefits of buying local food—whether to support the environment, local farmers and the local economy, or personal health. It is better for the planet, better for the economy, more nutritious, and even more delicious. Yet, the local food movement, the “collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies,” is still relatively weak. Why?
Perhaps the movement remains so small because it seems futile. Americans might wonder how small farms can possibly produce enough food for an entire country of consumers, or how small farms can even grow the crops in demand without resorting to the industrial “shortcuts.” Yet, small farms are actually two to ten times more productive than mega-farms, providing a greater contribution towards economic development (Sweely, 2008). Often, these farms are “multi-functional”—more efficient, making better use of natural resources and safeguarding the future of agricultural production (Rosset, 2000, p. 1). Every day, local and organic farmers prove that it is “entirely possible to nourish the soil, and ourselves” using techniques that are more friendly to the environment (Pollan, 2009, p. 804). Pollan argues that it is entirely possible to build a more diversified agriculture—rotating crops and using animals to recycle nutrients on farms—and give up our more recent vast, nitrogen and gas-guzzling monocultures.

It could be that simple misinformation is preventing most Americans from getting involved in the sustainability movement; vague language surrounding our food clouds understanding of the origins of our food. For example, satisfied the idea that their food comes from a “farm,” we might fail to consider the particularities about the farm itself. We might be surprised to know that the industrial farm that grew most of the food in the market is so different from the quintessential farm our imaginations conjure that we might not even recognize it as a farm at all. Signs at the supermarket seduce us with language such as “fresh” and “ripe,” yet these words reveal nothing about the way in which the crops were grown, harvested, and transported. In “Double-Talk,” Rick Bass (2009) explains that, “Big business runs the country, and frankly, whenever writers do battle with the monied interest, [they] expect to lose more than [they] win” (p. 623). Industrial farms are free to make loose claims that may mislead or confuse Americans as to the origins of their food. “Fresh” does not mean local, and “ripe” does not mean nutritious.

Perhaps, it is that Americans, on a national level, reject the urgency of the environmental or economical problems caused by global foods. For most consumers, the consequences might feel distant and obscure; Bill McKibben (2009) believes that Americans are “fatally confused about time and space” (p. 762). Though we know that our culture has placed our lives on a “demonic fast-forward,” we imagine that the earth works on a much slower time scale. For this reason, many Americans may feel no need to support an idea that is relatively intangible and irrelevant to daily life, especially when global foods are more available, more convenient,
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and less expensive.

Perhaps, we are just limited in our choices and resources. Fundamentally ill-equipped, we lack the resources and the unhindered ability to overhaul our food-buying practices. Non-local foods have become so standard that we lack the ability to choose local food all the time, and committing to local products would involve some sacrifices for the average American consumer. A local diet requires extra money, time, and resourcefulness. Often, local produce is more expensive than an industrially-produced, non local version of the same variety. Moreover, farmers markets are open on certain days of the week, requiring extra travel and scheduling. Since most crops are not available year round, and the incorporation of foreign fruits and vegetables into the diet would demand flexibility and creativity. Sometimes, local produce looks imperfect—smaller or differently colored—reflecting the natural environment that supported it. The transition to local food would be a gradual one, gaining momentum as resources, choices, and options increased.

Today, we have come to consider these conveniences as our rights. However, in his essay “If Nature Had Rights,” Cormac Cullinan (2009) references Cicero, who pointed out that, “...each of our rights and freedoms must be limited in order that others may be free” (p. 645). It is far past time that humans should consider limiting their own rights, or conveniences, in order to allow the flora of a community to play their part; we need to examine the repercussions of our eating habits and adjust those habits in order to benefit the environment, the economy, and personal health (Cullinan, 2009, p. 645).

Whether it is because we are misinformed, uninspired, or fundamentally unable to commit to local food, Americans have accepted the globalization of food without considering any of the negative impacts that it entails. We have, essentially, decided that our individual and collective human rights are greater than the rights of the other members and communities on the Earth. It is time to balance our rights with the rights or other human and nonhuman members of the planet. By making a conscious choice to purchase local food, we can assert our ability to improve our local ecology, economy, and health. As Aldo Leopold’s famous land ethic states, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Cullinan, 2009, p. 645). Currently, as we mindlessly stroll through supermarkets filled with non-local products, we are in the wrong. However, we have the tools, information, and the ability to make decisions that will take us towards the “right.” The benefits of local food will radiate from our individual beings and reverberate throughout our communities and the world.
Works Cited


