



Going Local: Community food for a clean climate

When you sit down at any meal, there's a good chance that many of the ingredients are better travelled than you are. Whether it's sugar that's been grown, processed and trucked from the other side of the continent, to coffee that began its life on the other side of the Pacific or Indian Ocean, the food we eat is fuelled by cheap fossil fuels. While cheap oil has severed us from having to eat what's in season or what can be grown within the unique limits of our local, home environments, the oil-guzzling global food system is increasingly recognised as holding one of the heaviest environmental impacts on the planet.

Over the last 50 years, economic globalisation has seen an increase in food trade across the world. However, this has been matched with an increasing concentration of food supply into the hands of fewer, larger suppliers and paralleled with the centralisation of distribution and retailing through supermarket chains and their distribution centres. In Australia, the largest 10 percent of farms are responsible for 60 percent of total agricultural output, and this share is growing. Concentration is even more pronounced in the retailing of Australia's food, with two supermarket chains, Coles and Woolworths, controlling almost 80 percent of food sales. Globally, 70 to 80 percent of the world's grain trade is controlled by two corporations, Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland.

A consequence of a highly concentrated food system is a massive increase in the distance food travels from farm to fork, and with it, a decrease in energy efficiency. In the UK since 1978, the average distance food travels has increased by over 50 percent. A recent study of food transport in Australia offers an estimate that an average Victorian household food basket of 29 items purchased from a supermarket could have travelled up to 70,803 km, including conservative estimates for the production of the packaging. This is nearly twice around the circumference of the earth, or three times around the coastline of Australia.

The burning of fossil fuels like oil is a key contributor to climate change, and as the same British study describes, a "sample basket of imported organic produce could release as much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere as an average four-bedroom household does through cooking meals for eight months".

Often more energy is consumed (in the form of non-renewable fossil fuels) than the food itself contains (as food calories). According to one study, for every calorie contained in an iceberg lettuce grown in Los Angeles, 127 calories of fuel are consumed flying it to the UK. Fuelled by cheap oil, it now seems that some countries simply swap food, the 'logic' of global trade leading to countries simultaneously importing and exporting the same food.

Eating local is a crucial first step to increasing control over what we eat and taking action for a more sustainable food system. Local food organisations like the 100 Mile Diet Society, Locavores and the Eat Local Challenge have sprung up across North America. In the UK, even big corporations

are making a show of accounting for their energy use and 'food miles' with supermarket chain Tesco adopting a local food range and potato chip company Walker's placing carbon calculations on its packaging.

By eating local food, we can completely bypass the long and anonymous supply chain between us and some distant industrial farm. By building direct relationships with local farmers and growers through farmers' markets, for example, we can understand exactly how our food is produced, and through our purchases, strengthen the local economy. As Brian Halweil describes, as Nebraska, part of America's 'breadbasket', has disappeared beneath sprawling expanses of soybean or corn monocultures, this traditionally agricultural region has found itself no longer capable of feeding itself. In response, local eating has surged, allowing urban dwellers to reconnect with those who produce their food. This has seen both the proliferation of farmers' markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes, as well as strong support for the protection of farmland, through such measures as tax credits and support for mass transit to reduce the amount of food-growing country paved over for roads. This support comes from an understanding that "farmers connected to a community are likely to farm more responsibly".

Buying locally also has tangible benefits for supporting the local economy. Money spent at local businesses or markets tends to stay within the local community, being spent on local goods and services again and again. This is in stark contrast to supermarkets, where only a handful of local people are employed and all income flows away to a distant corporate headquarters and shareholders.

For an increasing number eating locally is not just a food fad, but a necessity in a broader shift towards relocalisation and away from unsustainable corporate globalisation. Helena Nordberg-Hodge and Steve Gorelick write that relocalisation may be the single most effective thing that we can do to counter the dire impacts of economic globalisation. They question whether it's realistic to imagine that we can continue to attempt to draw "the entire global population into a single economy - one in which a small fraction of the population already uses the bulk of the world's resources. Today, roughly half the world's people, mostly in the South, still derive a large proportion of their needs from local economies. Do we really believe that those people's lives will be improved if we destroy these economies?"

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Nordberg-Hodge and Gorelick see localisation as a process of decentralisation, "shifting economic activity into the hands of millions of small and medium-sized businesses" instead of concentrating it in the bank accounts of a handful of transnational corporations. With its emphasis on community self-determination, the global food sovereignty movement offers an exciting model for a global food system that respects the rights of local communities and the environment. It is not against trade, but rather emphasises the right of communities to determine just and equitable terms.

Sustainability begins at home

As we in the industrialised world have become 'global souls', caught in the tide of economic globalisation, we have lost our place-based knowledge. "As a world culture, we are discarding our appropriate relations with the natural environment of which we are a part; associations that have nurtured and are successful over millennia are being abandoned", observes scientist Carl McDaniel . Local food not only builds relationships in our local economies and communities, but can play a key role in re-cultivating connection with the seasons and landscapes of our home bioregion. For a culture that has become almost uniquely disconnected from both nature and our home regions, eating local also offers us a means to begin to 'reinhabit' our landscapes. Reinhabitation is essential in learning the capacities of an environment, seeking to "ground human cultures within natural systems, to get to know one's place intimately in order to fit human communities to the Earth, not distort the Earth to our demands" .

Whether it's the 100 Mile Diet in Canada, Slow Food in Italy, or in the food sovereignty movement emerging in fields and farms across the world, loving the local is growing into a global movement. With increasing awareness of the planet's environmental crisis, and corporate globalisation seeking further expansion, local eating offers a tangible way to take personal and community action. Local eating is not only good for you (what could be better than fresh, seasonal produce, grown with sensitivity to the local environment?) but is a crucial factor in building resilient local communities, strong regional economies and a meaningful understanding of the limits of our home habitats.

Further reading

Gary Paul Nabhan, 2002, *Coming home to eat: the pleasures and politics of local foods*, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York

Alisa Smith & J. B. MacKinnon, 2007, *Plenty: one man, one woman, and a raucous year of eating locally*, Harmony Books, New York

Brian Halweil, 2004, *Eat here: reclaiming homegrown pleasures in a global supermarket*, Worldwatch Institute, Washington

Raj Patel, 2007, *Stuffed and Starved: markets, power and the hidden battle for the world's food system*, Black Inc., Melbourne

Barbara Kingsolver, with Steven L. Hopp & Camille Kingsolver, 2007, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: our year of seasonal eating*, Faber and Faber Limited, London

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**RECLAIM
THE FOOD
CHAIN**



The most political act we do on a daily basis is to eat.

- Professor Jules Pretty, University of Essex, UK

Friends of the Earth's Reclaim the Food Chain campaign brings together community members who are passionate about contemporary food issues. Reclaim the Food Chain campaigns both on issues of trade and agricultural policy, as well as having a strong emphasis on local, practical food production and community building.

To get involved, visit <http://www.adelaide.foe.org.au>, or contact Friends of the Earth on 08 8227 1399 or at joel.catchlove@foe.org.au.