

<http://conniff.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/06/13/dont-buy-local/>

June 13, 2007, 5:38 pm
Don't Buy Local!

By Richard Conniff

A lot of people have begun to lose their appetite lately at the thought that their food travels, on average, 1,500 miles from farmer to dinner plate. Buying, instead, from local farmers looks increasingly appealing: We get fresher produce (and benediction from Alice Waters), while also preserving open space and protecting local jobs.

But what's really lifted the "buy local" movement out of the foodie realm and into general public awareness is fear of climate change: It suddenly seems dangerously profligate that we spend 36 calories of fossil fuel energy transporting one calorie of California lettuce to a consumer in New York. Likewise that apples in a New England supermarket come from New Zealand, or potatoes in Ireland from Cyprus, or flowers in the Netherlands from Kenya. Carrying carbon to Newcastle seems to be among the chief functions of modern international trade.

So my first reaction was to think that buying local makes a lot of sense. And if it's true for food, what about the pots we cook that food in, or the furniture we sit on, or the cars we drive to the supermarket? When does "Buy American" morph from jingoism to progressivism?

And yet buying local may not be the simple answer we're looking for. For starters, it's more likely to hurt American farmers than help them. Agriculture is one area where the United States still enjoys a trade surplus, amounting to \$5.66 billion last year. But the "buy local" movement is strongest in Europe, where it got its start, and American agricultural products feature prominently among the targets.

The "local" label also says little or nothing about a product's actual environmental friendliness. A resident of Sacramento, for instance, can take comfort in buying "local" rice, but it's still likely to be rice grown in a heavily irrigated desert, at huge environmental cost. In the overall carbon footprint of a product, the cost of transport often turns out to be relatively trivial. For instance, a New Zealand study recently made the case that better conditions make lamb grown there and shipped to Europe four times more energy-efficient than home-grown European lamb.

The opposite is true for products that must be air-freighted, like flowers and certain fresh seafood; good sushi probably comes with a huge carbon footprint. But sea freight can be surprisingly efficient, even for heavy manufactured goods. I asked an environmental group, the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy, to calculate the cost of getting an average car from Tokyo to San Diego, and we were all surprised that it came to

between 1,000 and 1,800 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions. That's close to what the same car will typically produce every month for the rest of its driving life.

But how do you factor a product's total carbon footprint into the debate over international trade? For instance, would it make sense to impose a carbon tax at our borders, so countries that fail to control their global warming emissions, like China and India, don't get an unfair competitive advantage over countries that take global warming seriously? Great idea. Kyoto-signatory nations in Europe are already talking about taking that kind of stand—against the United States.

Or maybe we could piggyback on cap-and-trade systems like the one already functioning in Europe. These systems impose mandatory overall limits on global warming emissions within a nation or region, but allow businesses that do better at meeting targets to sell carbon credits to businesses that do worse. To enter a market with a cap-and-trade system, an importer would have to compensate for a product with a big carbon footprint by adding the cost of carbon credits into the price. Such a system would catch countries or individual manufacturers that refuse to act on global warming (again possibly including the United States).

But either the carbon tax or the credit system is likely to lead to years of litigation through the World Trade Organization, according to Elliot Diringer of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change. That's because the subtext in both approaches is confrontational and protectionist. Avoiding the us-and-them mindset and seeking collaborative solutions makes far more sense when scientists increasingly suggest that all of us together could soon be up to our knees in the rising consequences of global warming.

So where does all this leave the individual shopper trying to make good choices? Tesco, Britain's largest retailer, is now working to put a "carbon label" on every product it sells. Instead of the comfortable illusion of environmentalism provided by the "buy local" idea, this label will detail the actual global warming cost of a product. And that will probably show that it makes sense to buy that compact fluorescent lightbulb, even if it was made in China. And, yes, the climate will probably be better off if you buy a Prius manufactured in Japan, not a Cadillac Escalade made in the United States.

Beneath the surface, the urge to buy local is often just a disguised version of the urge to punish someone foreign. But as a way to fix global warming, fretting about where your salad was grown is like thinking you can win a war by calling your sauerkraut "liberty cabbage."

114 comments so far...

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1.
June 13th,
2007
8:13 pm

I have the impression that early advocates of buying local had both carbon and a connection with farming in mind. There is a big difference philosophically between labels at a giant supermarket and talking with a grower at a farmer's market. The latter involves education beyond fretting about global warming.

I buy local food at the farmer's market and I've ended up adding a lot of good foods to my diet because the farmer's told me what was good and how it was grown. As a student of agriculture, which I think is woefully ignored in American thought, I love seeing all sorts of people at these markets actually learning about how food is grown.

I still buy my bananas and avocados, but for me buying local at a farm or farmer's market is fun and interesting. It also keeps me away from junk food. A label just wouldn't cut it for me.

— Posted by Melissa McEwen

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2.

June 14th,

2007

1:41 am

It's certainly worth looking at some of the assumptions that go into calculating the carbon footprint of a food item (or any other trade item for that matter). But by reducing the entire local food movement to a simple matter of carbon footprints, Mr. Conniff misses many other aspects of the reasons why our family now has not one but two root cellars and freezers in our basement to hold all the local food we eat year around.

The notion of maintaining a good trade balance and not worrying about the carbon footprint falls apart when you ask why it is better for Washington State apple growers to ship their apples to Europe at the same time we import apples from New Zealand or China. The old phrase Coals to Newcastle comes to mind, and there's nothing efficient about this except the race to the bottom regarding price (and wages) in globalized markets.

The example of "local" rice in Sacramento is somewhat disingenuous, as that rice is, indeed farmed industrially, even if it is technically organic. Most farmers offering food to truly local markets do not practice industrial farming, even if they are not officially organic certified. And our own philosophy about local foods is to import items that are easily transported, such as rice, beans, and coffee, but seek out local versions of heavy, perishable, and bulky things like meat and fresh fruits and veggies. We still eat imported chocolate and tea quite liberally in the grand tradition of global trade in exotic delicacies.

Then there is the matter of the nutritional value of locally-raised foods. Numerous studies have shown that genuinely free range eggs and grass fed beef have significantly higher Omega 3 content compared to industrially raised eggs and meats. It's not that

these products couldn't be shipped longer distances, but the overall freshness of fruits and vegetables allows farmers to raise varieties that taste better and are more nutritious, rather than simply surviving shipment.

Lastly, eating local is not about punishing foreigners. It is about supporting and sustaining local economies at a human scale the world over. People everywhere should be growing and eating their own food for their own economic security and personal health. One of the greatest problems in developing countries like India is the destruction of local agriculture and food security in the name of globalization and monetizing the local food economy. We are helping farmers in our community make a decent living at something they are passionate about, and we believe that model applies everywhere. There is nothing punitive or xenophobic about it.

— Posted by Steven Allison-Bunnell

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3.
June 14th,
2007
2:12 am

Bottom line. Local food tastes better.

— Posted by Robin Quon

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4.
June 14th,
2007
4:21 am

Interesting post. I don't know very much about the local food movement. What I do know is that conservation is about choices. In the environmental movement right now there are several major issues, climate change, biodiversity loss, invasive/exotic species, desertification to name a few. Unfortunately, what is good for one is not always good for the other. Climate change is encouraging vigorous debate about carbon costs of transit and production, and that is positive. But in the course of my master's research I have read about the major threat to biodiversity by the conversion of traditional European pastureland to intensive crop production (or other uses). Land that once provided habitat to many creatures, most notably birds (I think) is now disappearing for the efficient agricultural machine. I wonder if that was accounted for in the Australian research. And how can it be, truly, because how to balance the claims of biodiversity with the claims of climate change?

— Posted by Liz Wuerker

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5.
June 14th,

2007
6:18 am

It's all very well for Alice Waters and her cohorts to "eat local". THEY live in CA. For those of us in New England, we'd eat frost bitten turnips, shriveled carrots and potatoes, and mealy apples all winter. Be real!

— Posted by aajay

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6.
June 14th,
2007
6:56 am

Nice story, to bad Mr. Connif misses the point of the "Buy Local" movement. Its about supporting local small farmersits about building local food security. Its about building strong local communities, which mean having a source of farmers to supply it and the business that in turn support the farmers. Carbon footprint is important but that is not why the localvore movement got started.

— Posted by Howard Prussack

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7.
June 14th,
2007
7:20 am

I hope your email doesn't turn anyone off buying local. There is more to the idea of buying locally than the carbon footprint. You might be able to make a case for non-food items, but I can't believe that buying locally grown produce from farms that follow sustainable and/or organic practices is worse than buying produce grown thousands of miles away.

I really think that you would be hard pressed to find more than 1 or 2 people at your local farmer's market who said they were buying locally grown produce because they want to "punish someone foreign". I think that the main reasons why most people buy locally grown food are the comfort of knowing where the food comes from, knowing the farmers and their practices, and helping local farmers stay in business. In the area that I live, farmland is frequently gobbled up for suburban sprawl. I'm happy to use my spending power to keep more farmland in the hands of local farmers.

— Posted by Sheryl

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8.
June 14th,
2007

7:35 am

One of the big problems with locally grown foods besides how they're grown is distribution...a thousand small trucks heading to a supermarket (even to a farmers' market) is worse than one big truck pulling up.

The argument for local foods a la Waters has always had the feel of another marketing ploy to the striving middle classes. It's wrapping luxury foods up with self-congratulation for doing so, no different than insisting on buying tailor-made suits when the lower classes buy theirs off the rack.

It's a shame that so many educated Americans no longer recognize our agricultural industry for what it is: probably the biggest technological achievement in human history, the underpinning of a civilization where food is cheap, and famine is unimaginable.

— Posted by David Goldsteen

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9.

June 14th,

2007

8:13 am

Of course, energy is a huge part of the local food movement. But it's also about food quality, safety, and community.

Anything shipped from California is bound to be a little less tasty, colorful and less nutritious. It's also probably more expensive to buy whole foods' kale than to buy a bunch from a greenmarket farmer when kale is in season. Buying local food in season is a great way to explore the local ecology, and to practice humility vis-a-vis nature (You just can't get tomatoes like that all year round, is a common refrain I hear at the greenmarket, and it also applies to strawberries, apples, eggs, stone fruit, garlic, root vegetables, and so on). Good, tasty, vibrant fruit generally means more nutritious fruit.

Grow things at the right time where they're supposed to grow, and nature protects itself. E.Coli infected our spinach last year in one of the most modern lettuce production plants known to man.

Can we feed everyone with local farms? Probably so. With the current farm bill? No. What about the California mega-farmers with their trade surplus? Some scientists say that soil has been ruined by decades of industrial farming, and that it may only have 50 years left on it. Surpluses don't come for free.

— Posted by Ryan in Washington Heights

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10.

June 14th,

2007
8:26 am

Perhaps so, but living in Michigan and seeing this beautiful state die is very sad. Thousands of people are out of jobs, and for every job that opens up many, many more people apply and show up, hoping to be able to provide for their family for one more day.

I think protecting the environment is important, and I like the cap-and-trade idea, and I wish the American car companies would've looked ahead earlier and done better sooner, but they didn't. Tell me which car company uses the most domestic labor and I will probably buy from them. I don't want to punish anyone foreign, that's not what this is about, but I'd rather put food on my neighbor's plate than not.

— Posted by Kate

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11.
June 14th,
2007
8:30 am

There are very few simple answers in life, and even fewer for problems with the complexity of global climate change. "Don't buy local" is another one of those simple answers that doesn't come close to passing muster. You call it protectionist (and choose some intentionally alarming examples like Sacramento rice), I call it common sense. If the vegetables I eat, which can be grown in local soils without large quantities of fertilizers or irrigation, are shipped 5 miles instead of 1500 miles, I think it's pretty safe to assume that they are likely to carry a lower "carbon footprint".

I do applaud you for highlighting the fact that buying local is not in itself a panacea - but please don't belittle the enormous contributions to emissions caused by our collective love of shipping goods halfway around the world. All other things being equal, I think it's pretty clear that it IS better to buy local, even if some of our own American farmers are forced to change their business model in response. How about we start there instead of with snide remarks about cabbage?

— Posted by Andrew

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12.
June 14th,
2007
9:02 am

Beneath the surface, the urge to buy local is often just a desire to get the best food available. That is why I do it, and, frankly, this immigrant finds the accusation of xenophobia sort of offensive. There's plenty of that to go around these days, but grocery

shopping is not likely to be one of those places. Unless of course, you consider giant factory farms in California foreign—then you might be right.

— Posted by jasmurph

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13.

June 14th,

2007

9:12 am

This column is good enough to get us thinking about the issue, and is on the right track, but leaves a bit out. And I totally disagree with the last paragraph. I've been "buying American" for a long time, but with certain obvious exceptions- the Prius being one. If I can buy an article of manufacture- say, for example, a kitchen utensil, household implement, package of socks, even LIGHTBULG- and there are two on offer, one American-made and slightly more costly and one foreign-made and cheaper, I'll buy the American item. Not because of jingoism or to "punish someone foreign" but to try to support the very very few, rapidly diminishing, manufacturing jobs still left in this country. To make a statement that it IS worth spending a few more dollars in order to keep more of those dollars in the hands of American workers. To make a statement that I do not support sweatshops and forced child labor. And if I can buy produce that has already traveled many miles in who-knows-what conditions, or one that was grown an hour away and is therefore fresher, I'll buy the local produce. It's not just about "liberty cabbage" or a "comfortable illusion of environmentalism". Dollars are an important way to vote, and I wish we would all do more of it.

— Posted by Ann

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14.

June 14th,

2007

9:18 am

Mr. Conniff argues that we have to wait for the Tesco's of the world and the international trade lawyers to sort out the truth for us about the real environmental and social costs of the things we buy. Meanwhile, we mustn't seek the "comfortable illusion of environmentalism provided by the 'buy local' idea." Uh huh. And these institutions are really motivated to solve the problem for us? Mr. Conniff seems to be lecturing down to us about our silly naivete from his own towering mountain of naive assumptions as though his stance were actually realistic and thoughtful, rather than what it actually is: abject complacency nestled within the "comfortable illusion of environmentalism" provided by the do-nothing-yet "realism" of global corporations.

— Posted by Andrew J Brown

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15.

June 14th,
2007
9:22 am

For somebody with such a reputation this seems to be a very naive analysis, he should have stopped at the first paragraph.

When i buy local produce I am looking at it first as an effort to support local growers , secondly as a way to minimise carbon costs within the US and then , well actually the jingoistic Buy American conceit doesn't come into it at all.

— Posted by Adrian

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16.
June 14th,
2007
9:26 am

Some good points, but the conclusion is incorrect: Most of us advocating for local agriculture have no “urge to punish someone foreign,” but an urge to fix a food chain that is dangerously broken in many respects.

The point is not simply that transporting food enlarges the carbon footprint, but that ignorance about where food comes from supports a whole host of practices that are both unsustainable for the environment and detrimental to the food. Farmed shrimp from Southeast Asia travel cheaply, but their production is consuming wetlands at an alarming rate, they're full of the toxins in which they live, they have no flavor, and their low cost has all but destroyed American shrimping; midwinter salad from California has been the source of several E. Coli outbreaks, and it tastes like the dirty water it's washed in; apples in three colors from New Zealand (and Washington) have driven dozens of less marketable but tastier varieties to near extinction. And the entire system supports a monocrop, genetically modified agricultural gigantism that decimates bio-diversity, family farms, agricultural traditions, artisanship, local self-sufficiency...

Eating local also has its limits as good agricultural policy. Citrus fruits, coffee, chocolate, sugar, rice, wine are among the many products that could not sustain themselves on local consumption alone, so it serves biodiversity to transport those products globally...but it's also environmentally useful to know where they come from and how they were produced.

Mr. Conniff repeatedly makes the unfortunate point that the U.S.A. is likely to get the short end of the “buy local” stick, but the fact is that we're going to have to either change our bad agricultural and environmental policies or pay for them—either in the short term through carbon taxes and European trade sanctions, or in the long term through the climate change and agricultural catastrophe we are courting.

And it's also unfortunate that what started as support for local agriculture has so quickly become a food fad, but we have the intellectual degradation of American culture and political discourse to thank for that. In the U.S., the line between progressivism and jingoism is indeed a fine one; where it gets crossed is in the office of the marketing director.

David Berman
Co-leader, Slow Food NYC

— Posted by David Berman

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17.
June 14th,
2007
9:34 am

Sure it might be a good idea to look a little further into the actual carbon imprint of the products we buy. Maybe buying local isn't always such an obvious choice. But what about the Carbon tax and the credit system? Conniff's main objections to these methods of reducing carbon emissions seem to be that one, they could harm the US and our trade, and two they are confrontational. In answer to that, I believe it's high time we stopped worrying about how such restrictions could harm the US and instead concentrated on reducing our carbon emissions. As for the carbon tax being confrontational, isn't that what we need. Conniff says we should work together. Well, at the last G8 summit, Merckel proposed each country sign a bill for environmental reform. Bush however, refused to sign. What we need is not some vague suggestions founded on the assumption that we will do what's right. What we need is a system that will make it in our better intrests financially to lower our carbon emissions. There's something seriously wrong when we can say that a product imported from Japan has less of a carbon imprint than the same product delivered to your local store from a couple of miles away. There is the real problem we need to focus on.

— Posted by Michaela

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18.
June 14th,
2007
9:38 am

While I applaud your attention to the carbon cost of lamb raised in New Zealand versus that of Europe, I think it's overly reductive to see the whole local food movement as being fueled by purely environmental and economic fears. Barbara Kingsolver's new book shows in its very existence that there is a strong aesthetic/spiritual aspect to. While you may find such "nostalgia" misguided, if it means something important to the many and diverse adherents of local foodism, I think it's worth taking seriously. Of course, we

should pay attention to the carbon cost of a particular food item before deciding where to get it from. But when did oranges in December become a necessity, not a luxury?

— Posted by Will

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19.
June 14th,
2007
9:41 am

I think Conniff makes several good points, but he seems to imply that because buying local cars doesn't make sense, buying local lettuce doesn't make sense either. That is a fallacy. I've never heard any advocate of buying local claim that we should buy cars locally. Buying local is almost always about food and food usually involves a different kind of economy than durable goods like cars. Some foods may be exceptional, like rice, but buying food locally does create community, support family and small-scale farmers, get you fresher produce, and reduce global warming.

— Posted by Raj

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20.
June 14th,
2007
9:45 am

Eating locally, or choosing to be a "locavore," is one of the small ways we can begin to correct the present death spiral of adding carbon to our atmosphere. Eating locally is a mindset – a social behavior – that should be encouraged. The academics of why it might be ineffective belong in the classroom of educational nonsense, as we face the reality, a hundred years out, or so, of an insidious disaster for all species.

Arguing about the finesse and details of cutting back on our carbon emissions in any way is a form of ignorance for which there is no excuse. Any method of cutting carbon emissions by changing our behavior should be considered a success.

— Posted by Bill J

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21.
June 14th,
2007
9:46 am

I personally subscribe to the "buy local" movement when it comes to food and I find Mr. Conniff's argument against it to be unconvincing. First of all, the argument for eating locally is not primarily an economic one. I could care less if it ends up hurting American corporate farms that export to Europe. They will reap what they sow regardless of my

eating habits. I don't buy locally out of some kind of national pride, or nativist desire. I do it for my own health and the health of the planet. I think these things are far more important than our trade deficit. I don't eat things that have been grown locally that rely on environmentally harmful irrigation practices. The point is to eat what grows naturally in one's own region.

— Posted by Charles Montgomery

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22.
June 14th,
2007
9:50 am

This piece feels like a simple way to fill some newspaper space rather than an addition to the discussion on climate change. Perhaps the slant should have been the actual information- the concepts of "carbon footprint" and "carbon labelling." The notion of a Cadillac Escalade made in Detroit being more harmful to the environment than a Prius made in Japan mocks the entire concept of "buying local"- a term that I have generally ONLY heard applied to fresh fruits and vegetables. Further, the use of cliches like, "hurting the American farmer" is painful to hear. American farmers are, by and large, huge corporations who have reaped unfair, tax payer subsidized profits for decades. And finally, the repeated comments about the United States being penalized or suffering from the consequences of various strategies is offensive. We, as a nation should be penalized- higher taxes, paying more for food, etc.- since we are the major cause of global warming. Sorry to say, but I just don't think articles like this are helpful in any way.

— Posted by R. Guay

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23.
June 14th,
2007
9:50 am

Baby with the bathwater Richard. Thanks for an "insightful" article.

If buying local were about eco-chic, then this whole idea of "total carbon footprint" would be a definite consideration. But buying local has nothing to do with global warming or eco-chic behavior and everything to do with buying natural, region-specific foods. When oil runs out, regardless of how energy-efficient your trade mechanism is, you won't get to have apples from Chile on your table in New York. People with a true buy-local approach to food don't worry about carbon footprints because they're not buying rice from the California desert or corn from the monocultured Plains. It's the trendy eco-chic crowd that brings a bad name to buying local, focusing primarily on assuaging their eco-guilt, without thinking hard about what food is, where it comes from, and how it affects a regional diet. If you stop approaching food with a political or ethical

bent, and start approaching it as a way of life, you realize how inadequate the agribusiness system is, organic OR conventional. It's not about convenience (having apples in May) or ethical behavior (buying industrial but at least organic), but about sustainability. Relying on local produce will help develop local eating habits and food cultures. Local farms in several regions have been around for as long as people used to eat this way; returning to a natural way of eating will also return the farm economy to relevance and viability.

— Posted by Daniel

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24.
June 14th,
2007
9:52 am

Some interesting and cogent points are made in this piece, but buying locally grown, organic produce at our local farmers' markets makes sense for me for the 6 months of the year they are available.

John Anderson
Asheville, NC

— Posted by John Anderson

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25.
June 14th,
2007
9:53 am

Visualize a container ship full of European bottled water traveling from Europe to North America passing another one full of bottled American water bound for Europe. Put water on the list of "buy local" items.

— Posted by robert gurfield

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26.
June 14th,
2007
9:55 am

Several other factors figure in besides the ones listed above. I live in a small town where buying local is catching on. The fresh produce tastes better than the store bought ones. I can buy freshly baked bread (same day) and local fresh eggs, but what I like best is seeing people, visiting with them, having a cup of coffee with them and just generally having a relaxed time as I buy the good produce. Even when I lived in a city of half a million people I had the same experience.

— Posted by fran sage

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27.

June 14th,

2007

9:55 am

You say that buying local actually hurts US agriculture but you don't say how. And can we trust figures without discussing agricultural credits and subsidie—especially now when we are beginning to find out how many go to wealthy farmers like Paul Allen and not to the people trying to save the family farm?

I agree that we shouldn't move toward protectionism. When I decide buy a CSA farm share I am not punishing anyone but I am helping a local farmer stay in business, use organic and environmentally sound farming practices, and my salad doesn't taste like a Dole plastic bag.

— Posted by Gail Ostrow

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28.

June 14th,

2007

10:03 am

While Richard Conniff's argument against buying local makes sense in regards to manufactured goods that have a large carbon footprint over the life of the product - the realm of agriculture and food is a different story. For growing food, buying local AND organic makes sense in terms of nutrition, economics, and the embodied energy (transportation fuel) in getting the food from farm to table. There are also unintended, long-term consequences (topsoil loss, nutritional depletion, childhood obesity/early onset diabetes) that result in depending on genetically-modified or agribusiness produced food. If you compare the cost/benefits of local vs. organic, in the realm of food, a systemic approach that includes both/and is best.

— Posted by Greg Camenzind

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29.

June 14th,

2007

10:11 am

Buying local does not mean buying stupid. Buying local increases the ability of consumers to ask exactly the questions you've raised with the producer who can answer them, an opportunity not generally available in the current retail market. Also, why the bait and switch, from food to industrial equipment?

— Posted by Mark Solomon

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30.
June 14th,
2007
10:19 am

This is a pretty thin argument. You take one small strain of the local food movement (the global warming aspect) and then extrapolate that to all products to conclude that a blanket 'buy local' approach won't necessarily help reduce carbon emissions. I don't think local food advocates have much to say about Escalades and Prius', frankly. The local food movement is mainly about freshness, community agriculture, and common sense, and the evidence you present that it will actually hurt American farmers is scant and superficial. Instead of taking local food seriously you set up a straw man and knock it down. Not very helpful.

— Posted by Jonathan Weber

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31.
June 14th,
2007
10:20 am

The only problem here is that carbon is not the only issue. If it were only that simple. Buying locally has the potential to address several major issues about how we produce and consume food. I think the carbon footprint idea is a great one. But maybe we also need a biocide label, and a water/air quality label, and a food quality label, in addition to the carbon label. For me, the idea behind buying local is to know the producer, and to choose food grown in ways that sustain the land, pollute the water and air less, and result in higher quality food that is free of corn, hormones, contamination and the like. Beyond that, the eggs and chicken and such I get from my local producer are like entirely different products than the ones from the supermarket.

— Posted by Gene

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32.
June 14th,
2007
10:21 am

I think you are just touching the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the local food movement. Carbon may be one of the issues involved, however, I would say that desire for fresh, organic(most of my customers do not know the codified version, they just do not want to be poisoned), and in-season produce is just as influential. Others, urban-suburban types, have found value in their families actually understanding where their

food comes from (especially the kids, they really get it!). Yet others are concerned by the increasing genetic stranglehold on foodstuff diversity by a few huge multi-nationals, whose goals diverge significantly from most local communities. I am just getting started, but you get the idea...The movement is probably here to stay because of the diversity of its constituents.

— Posted by Dean Bichsel

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33.
June 14th,
2007
10:28 am

For me, the focus of buying local has its roots in supporting local farmers and preserving and encouraging the growth of an interactive food chain connecting the producer and the consumer. However, buying “local” is also a philosophy that extends beyond exercises such as only buying food from within a 150 mile radius; much as the slow food movement is a way of encouraging global availability of food while supporting local production and control of food resources. I believe it encourages the consumer to take part in the process of eating and helps to bring a greater appreciation of what we eat, who produces it and how it is handled.

When I buy a bottle of wine from a small producer in Europe that reflects the individual characteristics of the region and is produced with respect for both the grape and the land, I consider that to be buying “locally”. It is the same as buying line caught fish from a long island fisherman or buying produce from a local organic farm. I participate in the process by taking the time to understand where my food comes from (to the best of my ability) and by supporting those people who respect that as much as I do. It is much more than just about labels such as organic or free-range or sustainable or local; it is about taking the time and the responsibility to reconnect with the people and the places that provide us with our food.

Local does not equal exclusive or anti-foreign, and I feel like your column was insulting and did a disservice by presenting it as such. If you want to talk about hurting American farmers I suggest doing an objective column on the farm bill and examine how that affects small independent farmers both nationally and internationally.

— Posted by marc

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34.
June 14th,
2007
10:29 am

The complexities of global warming and carbon are not unlike those we became aware of during the environmental movement of the 60s and 70s. The more we learn, the

better we are able to make changes at the local level that cumulatively result in positive contributions to reversing the damage wrought by human activities on the planet. Local means each and every household. Reducing the amount of carbon we create by changing how we live is our only alternative to an otherwise bleak future for our small planet. The cars we buy, the amounts of hot water we use and where our food comes from are all part of the web of complexity of global warming. Columns like this one will help raise awareness about the details, and where the carbon costs are.

— Posted by Eduardo

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35.
June 14th,
2007
10:35 am

The idea that somethings have less environmental impact if they are imported is without question. After all, conditions here in the Northeast make it hard, if not impossible, to grow grains, tropical fruits or even rubber.

But the idea that buying local is nothing more than “the urge to punish someone foreign” is ridiculous. Sure, some people might subconsciously be doing that. But I know many foodie types who opt for locally grown produce because it tastes better, retains more nutrients and also contributes less of a carbon footprint.

— Posted by Sarah

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36.
June 14th,
2007
10:46 am

In the Northeast, buying local is another way of preserving farmland, which for us is also valuable open space. Open space in turn allows replenishment of underground water supplies, fewer floods (I can't remember annual floods in eastern Pennsylvania, where I live, until the nineties, when McMansion construction took off) and less stuffing of children into crowded school districts. For me buying local is not a religious tenet, but self-interest.

— Posted by Stuart Wilder

*

37.
June 14th,
2007
11:12 am

Buying local produce for the people I know means going to a farmer's market in our town and buying locally grown, organic fresh vegetables and meats, brought to, and sold at the market by the farmers who produce this food. The produce is higher quality, certified organic, and most importantly, better tasting(!).

This "buy local" has absolutely nothing to do with what Mr. Coniff is writing about. Seems to me that this article is written for those who never buy local and who want to sneer at those who do, and so they might feel comfortable as they continuing to eat the same low quality food that they ate yesterday.

Neal Heidler
Bloomington, Indiana

— Posted by Neal Heidler

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38.
June 14th,
2007
11:16 am

For food, "buy native" is a good rule to follow before "buy local."

— Posted by Joseph Mohan

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39.
June 14th,
2007
11:19 am

This is an awful post by Conniff. Half of the article has nothing to do with food at all, but seems to be an extended argument for the abstract economic theory of comparative advantage. Conniff asserts that people interested in local food are obsessed with carbon footprints. This strikes me as wrong as taste and food safety are equally if not more important. This entire post is a good example of contrarianism run amok.

— Posted by Jeff

*

40.
June 14th,
2007
11:19 am

Good example of how over-simplifying a problem may lead to a non-ideal solution - there is more than just carbon to think about. Let's think about a total solution - for example, compact florescent lights are nice cause they use less energy, but what about the mercury used in their manufacture?

— Posted by Dan

*

41.
June 14th,
2007
11:36 am

Buying local food is about more than its carbon footprint.

We really enjoy meeting and getting to know the people who grow our food. Others do too, which is one reason Portland has gone from one to a couple of dozen farmers' markets in the last few years.

Local food is tastier and much better quality than industrial food. We eat flavorful fruits, berries, vegetables, cheeses and baked goods. Cooking and sharing local food with friends is a treasure beyond price.

Local farmers and ranchers are much more ethical about raising and harvesting food.

Local food can be specialized and still be profitable, for example growing regional or ethnic foods like okra is feasible. There is a wider choice.

Local growers welcome visitors so kids get to visit and learn where their food comes from. Often they get interested in growing gardens themselves.

Mike O'Brien

— Posted by Mike O'Brien

*

42.
June 14th,
2007
11:37 am

This is ludicrous.

When it comes to food, if you're able to buy something from local, small farms you should always do so. It's a benefit to you, your local economy, and the environment (carbon emissions are such a small part of the debate when it comes to comparing ecological advantages of small farms vs. large industrialized ones - think pesticide use, synthetic fertilizers, hormones and antibiotics in livestock, and soil and land degradation). Not to mention the clear and unhealthy lack of connectivity the American population has with whole foods and the farms that produce them.

Everyone - in the US and abroad - should buy some or most of their food from local small farms. You can debate it all you want, but take a trip to the farmers' market (or to

the farm itself if you're so lucky) and it will quickly become clear that this is an obvious choice.

— Posted by Gwen

*

43.

June 14th,

2007

11:38 am

Some of us buy local because it tastes better. Food that has not traveled for is food that has been selected for taste, not durability during shipping. That's why California strawberries in New Jersey taste so bland (but look pretty), while New Jersey strawberries in New Jersey taste fantastic, but sometimes aren't quite so uniformly attractive.

That's great if I've reduced the carbon output of my food choices, but I buy local because it tastes better and is healthier...that's it.

— Posted by Marie

*

44.

June 14th,

2007

11:42 am

Just don't confuse this with the 'slow food' movement!

— Posted by Justin Repasky

*

45.

June 14th,

2007

11:42 am

Your post is accurate in describing the multi-factor calculations that must go into all our buying decisions — it's not just where it's made, it's how it's made, and how it's used once it's made. But your flippant conclusion doesn't really make sense. Aren't we better off buying locally-grown produce from farmers who are sensitive to environmental impact? (Or a hybrid vehicle with 60 MPG that's built, sold, serviced, and driven nearby?)

And the environment is only one progressive issue to consider — given our current political situation, what about energy independence?

More Americans, in fact, should "fret about their salad" — once we start thinking about *all* these factors in all the little choices we make, that's when we start to have a

big impact: protecting the environment, encouraging local businesses, building community relationships, relaxing OPEC's grip on our economy, and changing the way industry operates.

— Posted by jabbett

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46.

June 14th,
2007
11:50 am

Most people I talk to about buying local are referring to produce, maybe eggs and milk, but not pots and pans. Fresh fruits and veggies taste better than those picked green and shipped hundreds or thousands of miles. Niche farms are allowing small entrepreneurs to return to farming and make a living, while the big corporate farms get the bulk of the subsidies.

— Posted by Sandi Campbell

*

47.

June 14th,
2007
11:59 am

This is about much more than global warming. If something is being done locally that has adverse environmental consequences, we can address it "at the local level." Local food systems and food security equate to food quality. When we buy from local farmers, we make sure we are not going to have to depend on pellets from Uganda in some future nightmarish scenario where we have no control over what we eat. Food should not be subcontracted to international corporations in a world soon be plagued by energy shortages and climate change. There is going to be a lot of tap dancing as we adapt to new climate realities...and small farmers, food diversity, and microclimates will play a big role in our survival.

— Posted by Rose Anne DeCristoforo

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48.

June 14th,
2007
12:20 pm

Every time I read about someone "eating local" I wonder: what if everyone in the same circumstances did the same thing?

In New York or London, if everyone tried to eat only what was grown within 100 (or maybe even 300) miles, they'd starve.

Barbara Kingsolver's experience growing food and buying from neighbors, documented in "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle" might work for anyone who owned a large plot of land, canning equipment, and several freezers. At least it would work if some family members also had a paying job to support the habit. But even her well-off and high-functioning family hosted a local-refreshments-only party where she described buying up virtually all the local stuff in the county.

The more you ask what-if-everyone...? the more simplistic and ultimately silly the idea seems. Not to mention that an awful lot of us would have to live on potatoes and withering apples from around January to the end of May.

— Posted by Mae

*

49.

June 14th,

2007

12:20 pm

Although I agree that buying local is not the solution to our global warming crisis, I think it can be an important piece of the puzzle. However curbing climate change is not the only reason to buy local. Of the many reasons to buy locally produced foods, one of the most potent reasons is to preserve biodiversity around the globe. Many farmers around the world are pressured to change their agricultural practices and products that they grow in order to produce commodity crops for global markets, turning many agricultural areas into food deserts. By encouraging people to buy local, farmers will have markets for different crops and will be able to increase the biodiversity on their farms.

— Posted by jonathan Wilson

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50.

June 14th,

2007

12:24 pm

An interesting read, to be sure, but my sense is that you're missing the main point of the urge to 'eat local', which is generally towards smaller farms, less on the model of the giant agribusiness which services hundreds of millions of people and more on the model of the small town farm which serves a community. Food grown in this manner has the potential to be healthier and taste better; part of the reason for this is that it is not engineered to survive a journey from the other side of xanadu.

— Posted by local guy

*

51.

June 14th,
2007
12:27 pm

Buying from a farmer you know isn't going to hurt an American farmer.

It's a sensible, healthy choice. Not only will the produce be fresher, the fewer hands it passes through the less chance of contamination.

Your aim, I take it, is the standard one of Corporate America. Confuse the issue, confuse the consumer, make it all too complex to cope with and discourage anyone from doing anything.

It's time to shelve that tactic. It's getting old and it's certainly not helpful.

— Posted by C. Renard

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52.
June 14th,
2007
12:30 pm

Your point is well-made, but completely aposite to the 'buy local' food movement. Local food that TASTES BETTER is superior to bland agro-monster product. Local farmers are people we know and support. Thus we improve nutrition and strengthen our community. 'Buying local' pork chops and apples has nothing to do with light bulbs and Escalades!

— Posted by John Carl Harper

*

53.
June 14th,
2007
12:31 pm

I make the choice to buy local because I wish to support my friends and neighbors. In southeast Minnesota, many smaller family farms survive by doing "boutique" farming. For example, I buy lamb from a farmer who raises and grinds his own feeds that supplement the grasses his livestock eat. This way he is sure there are no pesticides, GMO crops or other unwanted things in the animals' diet. Also, Minnesota's large Hmong population has many truck farmers that provide the farmers' markets with many wonderful vegetables during the growing season and it helps support their families. So reasons to buy locally for me are not anti anyone else, rather they are pro my fellow Minnesotans.

— Posted by ruth ann grant

*

54.
June 14th,
2007
12:38 pm

If the “buy local” movement is strong in Europe and decreasing U.S. agricultural exports, then doesn’t buying local in the U.S. help U.S. farmers by mitigating their losses?

— Posted by Bradley

*

55.
June 14th,
2007
12:44 pm

Dear Sir:

Your article was not as provocative as its title, though it still misses the broad side of the barn. One can buy local AND environmentally sound products (or not buy as much, as often, for that matter). Why buy a Prius or an Escalade, if one could simply walk, ride a bicycle or take public transport? If more people would at least ‘consider’ (no need to fret, thank you) where their salad was grown (and more importantly, HOW it was grown), we would begin to have a different world. You should spend part of your day roaming the backyard pulling weeds and slugs from the salad greens, or roaming the farmer’s market rather than composing shallow, if not provocatively titled essays. Maybe then you will realize just how wrong your argument is.

— Posted by Brad F.

*

56.
June 14th,
2007
12:47 pm

If we assume that this column’s title is its take-home message, it sorely falls short of being convincing.

The comment about buying local hurting American farmers is utterly nonsensical. The fact that the “buy local” movement is strongest in Europe does not somehow mean that buying local produce will hurt the farmers you’re buying from. I can’t even figure out how the logic is supposed to work in that paragraph - because Europeans are favoring their own farmers, we shouldn’t do the same? That somehow our choosing to buy products from abroad will induce Europeans to do the same? It’s quite confusing, especially since it’s his primary argument against buying local agricultural products, which is the sector in which most people focus their local purchasing.

In the rest of the column, he makes a good point - that local may not always equal environmentally superior. People should be aware of the production and usage costs for the items they buy - but this doesn't mean that "buy local" is, itself, a bad idea.

— Posted by Kevin

*

57.

June 14th,
2007
12:50 pm

My choice to support local farmers and producers has nothing to do with an "urge to punish someone foreign."

I do consider the whole picture when making food choices, and I recognize that I can't get local coffee or bananas in Michigan...but I can support small-scale farmers that are "local" to Bolivia or Ecuador (for example) by buying their exported fair trade goods.

And I agree, locally-grown food does taste better! Hard to beat Michigan sweet corn in August, and winter squash in November.

— Posted by Laura M

*

58.

June 14th,
2007
12:54 pm

You say, "Agriculture is one area where the United States still enjoys a trade surplus, amounting to \$5.66 billion last year."

Sadly, that \$5.66 billion cost the taxpayers a whole lot more than that. Half of all farm income in the U.S.A. comes from the taxpayers, and the only "good" reason for that is that congress finds it easier to get campaign money from a few people dining on pork than the rest of us, to whom they offer nothing but contempt. We would be better off investing in our students and our industry than sending more "welfare wheat" to China. We would be better off paying the real price for what we eat than having a bureaucracy collect our taxes, our representatives then use our tax money to buy campaign checks and we end up with a congress that no one respects and pay too much for what we get, after the cost of bad government is considered. After all, Canada gets a lot of their sugar from Cuba, and pays the world price, half what we pay. A rational government free from bribes could save us a lot of money; we don't need intermediate steps, we need to kick the bums out now.

— Posted by Harrison Picot

*

59.
June 14th,
2007
12:58 pm

One thing the author fails to understand about the notion of eating locally is that the consumer eats products that grow naturally within the regional ecosystem. His example of rice in Sacramento is specious because that crop does not naturally grow in that region of California. You live in a desert you eat prickly pears and desert cabbage. If you're in New England in the fall you chow on apples. Or in winter you might eat preserved fruits, dried meats (aajay, no need for frostbitten turnips) And as stated before you support local farms and not the Archer Daniels Midlands of the world.

— Posted by Andrew Farrell

*

60.
June 14th,
2007
1:03 pm

I think it was Pollan that was promoting the 'buy local' movement but for dramatically different reasons.

#1 was biodiversity and the basic resistance to epidemics (of disease) that would help provide.

#2 was food-security, resistance to 'food terrorism' so that a single act would have more limited effect.

#3 I don't believe it was necessarily against economies of region. I don't believe it advocated growing rice in Alaska.

#4 The inherent damage that industrialised agriculture can inflict. Local recycling of animal waste for fertilizer (e.g., not the big dumping of animal waste on big farms.) Basically noting that ecosystems involved for interdependency, yet current industrial agriculture, by focusing on specialization and economies of scale, divorces these interdependencies. And consequently, these single-species factory farms require much more inputs in terms of manufactured fertilizers which aren't all that great for the environment either.

So, while I'll agree on the dangers of pandering to fearful passions, we shouldn't lose sight of the original goals and needs that brought us here.

— Posted by Marc

*

61.
June 14th,
2007
1:07 pm

I admire Tesco for working to put a “carbon label” on every product it sells. Out here in California, supermarkets are reluctant even to label produce by origin, even though much of which actually does come from within the state. After the spinach scare, briefly labels were seen on produce at our local Safeway, which shows it can be done. Why the reluctance? I wonder.

I look forward to hearing more on this subject, Mr. Conniff.

— Posted by Kit Stolz

*

62.

June 14th,

2007

1:11 pm

You missed an obvious point. Comparing food to cars doesn't make any sense.

Food tastes best and is most nutritious soon after it's picked. How do you achieve that if your food is coming from Chile or New Zealand?

— Posted by Sri

*

63.

June 14th,

2007

1:24 pm

The “rice grown in a desert” near Sacramento is in fact grown in flood-control plains during the wet season — the bypass system that protects Sacramento from being the next New Orleans.

The author seems to have confused Northern and Southern California.

— Posted by Heather Benjamin

*

64.

June 14th,

2007

1:28 pm

>>”A resident of Sacramento, for instance, can take comfort in buying “local” rice, but it's still likely to be rice grown in a heavily irrigated desert, at huge environmental cost.”

Actually, the rice in Sacramento is grown on the Sacramento river floodplain, not a “heavily irrigated desert.” In fact, a google search turns up this article about how rice farmers in Sacramento are in the unique position of being able to preserve waterfowl populations: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1216/is_n4_v193/ai_16166895

Money quote: “Rice has been the crop of choice in the Sacramento Valley since the turn of the century. While few other crops can grow in the poorly draining claypan of the Sacramento River floodplain, the packed soil holds the water that rice roots in, and—combined with the valley’s temperate climate—creates nearly perfect growing conditions for rice.”

— Posted by Brian

*

65.

June 14th,

2007

1:30 pm

I’m inclined to praise the author for making me think about the issues rather than criticise him for any perceived leaning in a particular direction. The questions are more important than the answers. My own opinion is that the local issue will swamp the others.. but still, the main point is there are no simple answers.

— Posted by Ken Elias

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66.

June 14th,

2007

1:31 pm

You’re missing the big picture on our Foreign Trade DEFICIT. Ignoring the this big picture is a real failure. I buy my agricultural products local as much as possible. Our farmers need our support.

— Posted by Steve

*

67.

June 14th,

2007

1:31 pm

I am disappointed with the very surface analysis of your article. Informing us consumers on the choice of “buying local” versus “mass produced” requires more than I find in this article.

Take food - pesticide costs, fertilizer costs, distribution, warehousing, packaging, marketing, handling, quality control... these are real costs and many of these are carbon contributors...

A local organic producer, distributing at a farmer's market will likely have a much smaller carbon footprint than the mass producer. But that's just my guess...

I was not informed further in your article... we really need to be better informed...

Bill

— Posted by Bill

*

68.

June 14th,

2007

1:32 pm

An enlightening and thoughtful article. I did not get the impression that the author is opposing local products, but rather that he is questioning some simplistic assumptions and advocating a broader perspective.

— Posted by Lynn Meng

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69.

June 14th,

2007

1:37 pm

Long, long ago everybody had to "eat locally". As transportation and communication improved, they were able to trade their own local food for someone else's local food, thus improving nutrition. Now that the world is such a small place, we can transport foods from far away, learning about other people and what they eat. Variety is important, and in the far past, people had illnesses from not eating a wide variety of foods. That has improved too. I really enjoy eating the world's huge variety of fruits, vegetables, and native dishes from around the world.

— Posted by Lynn

*

70.

June 14th,

2007

1:41 pm

What do they have to do to produce to get it to travel thousands of miles in a truck over long time periods and still appear appetizing in a grocery store? When you buy local

produce, especially if it's been grown organically (and being able to ask the farmer all of these questions is definitely a benefit of shopping at a farmer's market), it goes bad faster than most store-bought produce for a reason - it doesn't have all kinds of weird chemicals in/on it.

— Posted by Tonyia Cone

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71.

June 14th,

2007

1:49 pm

Frankly, Connif strikes me as a contrarian AND a writer needing a new slant to make a buck. I am a writer in an ocean of writers and words. I understand the impulse to challenge something for the sake of publication and pay.

I spent last Sunday morning at our local farmers' market and ate tomatoes grown a few dozen miles south of Flagstaff. They tasted as sweet and complex as the tomatoes I once grew in lake-front New York State. AND, I supported a small farmer and poured \$00. into the coffers of the corpo-rich and greedy.

— Posted by Mary S.

*

72.

June 14th,

2007

1:49 pm

Eating local means learning what grows in your region, and adapting your menu to synchronize with the seasons and with the horticultural products best suited to your place on the planet. For a desert dweller, buying rice irrigated with water piped in from another state is not really eating local. (I recommend Barbara Kingsolver's new book if you want the whole story.)

— Posted by Rob

*

73.

June 14th,

2007

1:50 pm

Interesting. Perhaps after all the money that can be made on global global warming has dried up, and all the studies and impact reports are done on the subject, we will be right back to square one as far as solutions are concerned, which I think your article may imply.

Buying local is a good idea only because you are helping your neighbor. All of the other true benefits are ancillary.

Furthermore, If Americans could get past “taste” as the only criteria for eating something, maybe we would all be healthier.

Tulsa, OK.

— Posted by Jeff Shaw

*

74.

June 14th,

2007

1:51 pm

I'm from Oregon. We buy local because the food tastes far far better. Buy a tomato at Safeway, it tastes like water, but it at the farmer's market you suddenly remember what tomatoes are supposed to taste like. I don't care about American farmers. They've got the farm bill which kills Mexican farmers. I care more about the Mexican farmers unable to produce corn at a price that can beat the artificially lowered price of subsidized American corn. They're out of jobs...American farmers are, quite literally, living high on the hog.

I'd rather put food on the plate of someone that doesn't have any. I have never understood the nationalist bug. I don't understand how someone can worry more about a rich American than a poor foreigner. Do they not bleed?

Sure I'm concerned about the environment too, but I don't think Mom and Pop growing vegetables out of their little farm and selling at the farmer's market is going to affect things much one way or the other. Stop Chinese imports until they stop using coal and stop funding genocide in Sudan. Methinks that would do a touch more than deciding where to buy your vegetables.

And if cars are having a huge environmental impact in transit from, stop imports until they get their environmental act together. Have them produce light rail instead of cars. I think it's pointless, in the face of an encroaching threat like this, to worry about where to buy your vegetables. Buy what tastes good and what you can afford. You want to do something about the environment? Ban cars in urban areas, a decent public transit system makes them obsolete anyway.

— Posted by Arthur Delaney

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75.

June 14th,

2007

1:53 pm

The purpose of buying local is to grow the local economy and build a microcosmic society - a reversal back to local communities and agrarianism featured in the works of Wendell Berry and such books as Michael Polland's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*.

PolyFace Farms in Virginia is usually cited as the leader in this movement.

— Posted by Thom

*

76.

June 14th,

2007

1:53 pm

I belong to a CSA (community supported agriculture) and while they have not taken on the expense of becoming “certified organic” they are committed to environmentally-safe growth and pest-control methods. They are also committed to providing their farm hands with a living wage. I strongly suspect that there are other CSAs and local farms where, although perhaps not certified organic, they are concerned with the way they treat crops and soil. After all, many small local farmers live on the land they farm and poisoning the land would translate to poisoning the ground on which they live. If we were to adhere to every “don't” that was published in a media outlet, we'd barely be able to eat, much less live.

— Posted by Johanna

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77.

June 14th,

2007

1:55 pm

For a supposedly knowledgeable journalist this article showed a very limited understanding of the “buy local” concept.

If everything was only about “carbon footprint”, we'd probably have to take his computer away from him.

— Posted by Joe D

*

78.

June 14th,

2007

1:56 pm

Mr. Coniff makes an odd argument that buying local will hurt American farmers. I guess it depends on what kind of “farmers” you want to support. If you want to support local, smaller farms in order to maintain a diverse — and therefore safer and more

sustainable — source of food, than buying local makes sense. Personally, I have no problem hurting the kind of massive, Monsanto-driven agribusiness that benefits from our heavily subsidized “farm bill,” the kind that dumps an enormous amount of petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides on the earth all in the name of cheap corn, and which, ironically, makes only Monsanto — surely never the farmers — rich. That kind of single-source, homogeneous, mass-food production is detrimental to the environment, our national health and the economy.

Buy local!!

— Posted by Lisa Wesel

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79.

June 14th,

2007

1:59 pm

For one thing (pardon me if I’m repeating someone else, not having read all the posts), local produce should cost less because of less fuel required to haul it to market over shorter distances. Of course, there’s much we can’t “buy local”: out of season warm weather produce (we’re so spoiled by fresh strawberries and cherries available all year). the only solution is to freeze what we can when the fresh fruit is available or buy it frozen from those who do that.

— Posted by maddy

*

80.

June 14th,

2007

2:07 pm

I think your article misses the point of buying locally, completely. As a consumer of both produce and meat, I try to buy locally, but I have not once thought that by doing that, I am “hurting” a foreign country (or by that argument, “helping” America). In fact, the idea of seeing agriculture from the grand scale of an entire country, seems to me, to be the reason that you miss the benefits of buying locally.

First of all, I’d like to comment on your point that in Western Europe, where this movement is strong, many US products are the targets. While that is probably true, you use this statement in your argument in order to plant an idea in the reader’s mind that if Western Europe were to clamp down on agricultural imports (and thus reduce our agricultural trade surplus) that it would be bad for the average American family-farmer. To reinforce that, you also seek to join the two phrases “buy locally” and “buy American”, which is ludicrous.

In reality, it's clear from past Farm Bill discussions/analyses that what is "good for America" is not "good for the local farmer". The last Farm Bill was signed in 2002, and as of that date, Food First, an Institute for Food and Development Policy has reported that "...today, our 2 million farms are home to 2 percent of the population. Small family farms have been overwhelmingly replaced by large commercial farms, with 8 percent of farms accounting for 72 percent of sales..." (<http://www.foodfirst.org/pubs/backgrdrs/2002/s02v8n3.html#link9>).

That in itself should make it fairly obvious that there are a few (very large) farms doing most of the farming business. Many of these very large farms are single crop farms that do not rotate crops or put into place crop rotation in order to practice responsible farming, instead stripping the land of nutrients (but producing more of that one single crop than a smaller farm). So buying locally, from a responsibly run farm not only supports a person living within a state or so of you, but it also may improve your chances of buying products from someone who has a vested interest in their land. (<http://multinationalmonitor.org/mm2000/00july-aug/interview.html>)

Your theory also fails when looking at the exports by state. By your linking of America with local as above, I would assume that if other countries were to block our agricultural exports (in order to buy locally), the local farmers in my area (NY Metropolitan Area) would be hurt by that. From the years of 2001 - 2005, the Exports by state/commodity have been tracked by the USDA (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/StateExports/sx5yr.xls>). At a quick glance of only the totals (all exports of Agricultural Products), there are 19 states whose agricultural exports top \$1 Billion/year. New York falls at only \$400 Million/year. Looking at the NY Metropolitan Area, NJ and CT export around \$100 Million/year.

Also, soybeans have, consistently, since 2002 been either #1 or #2 for export. Other categories that have remained at the top (though fluctuations in rank may have occurred) include: Red meat & Products, Corn, and Animal Feed/Meal (The USDA's Agricultural Trade Update; 2002 - 2007). To be fair, Fruits/Fruit Products and Vegetables/Vegetable Products are also consistently up there, but the fact that the categories are not Fruits and Vegetables leads me to believe those products are processed, not fresh grown produce. [If there is anyone out there who knows how to find breakdowns of specific product exports, not just categories, please post - it would be MUCH appreciated!]

Tying in these two ideas, looking at what NY actually exports (that would be hurt by this lack of ability to export that you feel would be the effect of buying locally), we find that NY exports are highest in the Dairy category, a category that is not in the top 8 of United States national exports. As a result, me buying from my local farmer supports my local farmer, who does not have much sway in the agribusiness industry.

The only effect that could POSSIBLY occur from this trend (and this is highly unlikely) would be a shift INSIDE America of people purchasing more local agricultural products which would, in turn, be bad for Agribusiness. Perhaps if that happened we might see a movement back to sustainable, responsible agriculture. Yes, this may reduce

our yield, but at the same time, reducing our yield would remove our need to dump agricultural products into the export market at prices lower than production values (thanks to farm bill subsidies). In turn, down the road, that may allow small farmers in other less developed countries build economies based on local farming, rather than counting on depressed prices of US exports. This wouldn't happen in your lifetime, if it's not entirely a pipe dream. So I'd let go of your worries that any of this behavior is bad for the average small farmer of America. My average small farmer isn't getting rich off of exports - they're selling to people like me who value what they do.

Finally, I would hope the general readership would take offense, or at least be surprised by your assumption of single-mindedness when you say that "...what's really lifted the "buy local" movement out of the foodie realm and into general public awareness is fear of climate change...". There are myriad reasons why people buy locally, new to the movement or not. Whether it's because they simply enjoy supporting the ever-decreasing population of local farmers, prefer to buy meat from a small local farm where animal treatment is better than in factory farming situations, enjoy the challenge of cooking what's in season in their area, or just don't WANT to support Agribusiness, it is unfair of you to assume the buy local trend and the climate change trend are inextricably tied.

— Posted by Stephanie, Bklyn

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81.
June 14th,
2007
2:10 pm

Irresponsibly oversimplified message in this article. Mr. Conniff is right in calling our attention to "buying local" as more of a grey issue than we originally thought. However he fell prey to the temptation of shock value using absolutist assertions like "it's more likely to hurt American farmers than help them." This untrue or at least oversimplified thought wrongly educates the public who will stop reading there. In reality, the statistics show that supporting local production has greatly spurred and revitalized farming economies around the world. tsk,tsk for using a message that will serve to get attention and for avoiding true education of your readers. This is bottom of the barrel journalism.

— Posted by Uri

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82.
June 14th,
2007
2:14 pm

The closing statement of, "Beneath the surface, the urge to buy local is often just a disguised version of the urge to punish someone foreign" tells me the author just doesn't get it.

I think the “urge to buy local” is driven by the inherent nature of humans wanting to connect. Knowing more information about local products like who grew/made it, are they a good or bad company are attributes that allow people to connect.

Why do people for the most part read their local paper more than they read the NY Times or other “national” papers? Because it’s more relevant to them. The stories in the local paper allow them connect with their neighbors better than national stories. The same holds true for “local” produce and any other “local” products. As the author mentioned, some buy local for environmental reasons but I feel more do so for civic pride and the want to connect.

As for the “urge to punish someone foreign”? I leave that to my President.

-Chris R.
Chicago, IL.

— Posted by Chris

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83.
June 14th,
2007
2:37 pm

During our years at Staten Island, NY I discovered a small farm runned by two Italian guys who were living and working there with two single sisters. It was glorious to walk thru the plantation to cut the lettuces, the tomatoes, the sweet basil...

Now at Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina I shop every saturday at an Open Market runned by gentle merchants from Bolivia. They wake up 3am. in the morning to shop for the produce that bring to my neighborhood to sell it from 7am on. The chance to buy truly fresh fruits and vegetables contribute to our human nature. As if we were back in that forest where our ancestors came to life...

(Am I too wrong?)

— Posted by Alicia B, Saler

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84.
June 14th,
2007
2:52 pm

OK you should check where & what “local” is - but the farmers market we try and use as much as possible is all local - almost all have a little certificate saying they are organic - OK that can be an example of fraud. But the farmers I am talking about are really local while you are talking about agribusiness corporations who will rip, tear, and uproot every local economy they can all with taxpayers subsidies that little guys do not

get. So if locals come back and do some creative destruction on the big gluttons the conservatives whine. But when little people are nailed to the wall - which is most of the time - Oh they are all over the benefits of creative destruction. It is all Phangate (pigeon Vietnamese for number 2 water buffalo externalities) The economy is ever more asymmetrical in favor of the big guys. Hey I like to see little locals win once in a while.

— Posted by Paul Camacho

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85.
June 14th,
2007
3:05 pm

I think the title of your piece is unnecessarily broad and inflammatory, and I think you completely miss the point of the “Buy Local” movement, which has about as little to do with xenophobia as the Minutemen have to do with compassion. In fact, I think your piece is poorly written and not up to the journalistic standards of the New York Times. Maybe if your piece was titled “Sometimes Don’t Buy Local!” it would have been more accurate.

— Posted by Ryan

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86.
June 14th,
2007
3:15 pm

Buying local and eating foods IN SEASON means that we support our local farmers. As an ex-farmer I know that cheap goods sold in big box stores helped put me out of the food business. It was more of the “Dutch Disease” type action that helped that happen as well. No one wants to work for next to nothing. Selling the land to a developer would have given us a nice nest egg to live off of. But that would dry up quickly. I love hard work, fresh air sunshine and seeing things grow. But my family has to eat too. So if you want more MacMansions instead of small farms, keep buying stuff from far away cheaply.

— Posted by Bill

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87.
June 14th,
2007
3:24 pm

I own farmland in Iowa but live in New York. Although I love Iowa I can no longer bear to go there because of what has happened to that once fresh and beautiful area. There are few birds, few wild critters to be seen; the air smells of chemicals and hog

lagoons; there is no decent food to eat or potable water to drink. I had to sleep with the windows closed while staying at a farmhouse B&B in the middle of the country because of the subtle but pervasive stench in the air.

I looked into doing Organic farming, but it's impossible to buck the system in that part of the country. We are slaves to the machines, chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and animal cruelty (tho' not on my land) which has brought us, as one blogger said, "probably the biggest technological achievement in human history, the underpinning of a civilization where food is cheap, and famine is unimaginable." Well, famine reigns supreme in this country...just look at the waddling multitudes of overfed yet undernourished Americans.

This is brought to you by Big Ag and the big chemical companies who have hooked America on toxic, nutritionless food. Look at our rates of cancer, diabetes and obesity. Then look at what we as Americans consider to be "food".

I buy local for these reasons: the food is more healthful, fresher, tastes better...there's more variety...I am helping to keep the rural flavor of my area of NY by supporting the local farmers. And I'm doing what I can to stop the terrible march of Agribusiness.

You could truly say, in my case, that "Beneath the surface, the urge to buy local is often just a disguised version of the urge to punish Big Ag for what they've done to my country."

— Posted by Anne

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88.

June 14th,

2007

3:27 pm

While even the ancient Romans recognized that one ought not to argue about matters of taste: "de gustibus non est disputandum," it is a fact that most of us do have very specific tastes or a lack thereof.

There is no accounting for bad taste, I would add, in spite of Jeremy Bentham's notion of the greatest good for the greatest number - it doesn't mean we should all favor Kraft Cheese over Vermont Cheddar. If we are vegetarians we need not debate about whether our beef is drying up rainforests in Brazil or whether it is employing Mexicans in Texas. It will a moot point. If more of us were vegetarians think of how much more water there would be and how much less methane from bovine manure cf. the article to which we all are responding mostly in favor of the local farmer.

The price of Vermont Maple Syrup has gone up commensurately with the price of fuel. What do you expect? In both cases the demand is static. I'll buy the Vermont Maple Syrup because California Maple Syrup is rather scarce.

We do not live in a “One Size Fits All World” and the best carrot to dangle if you’re looking for flavor is the organically grown one that came from soil that didn’t have chemicals in it twelve years ago. That could well be the carrot from your own yard. You can’t get more local than growing your own. The only carbon emission involved could be the fart you laid from the imported stuff you ate at some fast food place yesterday when you didn’t have more time to be more discriminating much less, more thoughtful about the quality of production much less the flavor of your food.

I’m in walking distance from two nurseries. I have been known to walk home with a plant rather than to drive. I believe I’m quoting Mark Twain when I say in summary “Lies, damned lies and statistics!”

— Posted by Nick

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89.
June 14th,
2007
3:41 pm

Huge corporate farms are ruining this country. Just as huge corporations are ruining our government. We will buy as much as we can as often as we can from local farmer’s markets. For anyone to suggest otherwise is ludicrous!

— Posted by Bleubeard

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90.
June 14th,
2007
4:15 pm

Will you non-farmer consumers ever get away from looking at food primarily from the “what benefits ME the most” perspective? What is cheapest for ME, what is tastiest for ME, what is most healthy for ME?

What about looking at the impact on our local communities - on your neighbors, especially those who are farming? If you buy local, that money stays in your community, it is spent at your local stores, invested at your local banks, it benefits everyone and the farmer receives a larger portion of the overall food cost. Not only that, if you buy local, you get to know and appreciate your farming neighbors, meet their kids, learn of their challenges, and buy community that way too. If you buy much-traveled food, that money mostly goes to the distributors, with relatively little making it back to the farmer, wherever they are.

Of course the system is not perfect, there are agricultural environmental and labor disasters everywhere, even in your own backyard. But if you know that - if you know

where the food you buy comes from and how it is being raised and how the workers are being treated, then you can avoid 'rewarding' that kind of farming. If you don't know that, you have no idea what kind of farming your money is rewarding.

We are organic farmers, farming about 1400 acres in upstate New York. Often I am asked whether all the food we eat is organic. My answer - for the most part, the food we eat is the food we raise, our own chickens, pork, beef, eggs, vegetables, fruit, and even the grain we grow is home-ground to make bread. Yes, it is organic, but more importantly, it is our own - we know how it was raised, because we raised it. And if we didn't, like with our Thanksgiving turkey, we know how and where it was raised by our friends, David and Kathy. Do we eat oranges in December? Yes, occasionally, but actually our own frozen strawberries and home-canned peaches taste better.

Rather than just concentrating on 'carbon miles', 'food miles' or something like that, how about 'community benefit credit' - have we substantially voted with our food dollars to benefit our own community to the best of our ability? Have we done something substantial to increase the self-sufficiency and sustainability of our community, and all the people who live there? Is that a gift you are willing to give the farmers near you?

Because if you do, you most likely also will be getting tastier, healthier, and often cheaper food!

— Posted by Mary-Howell Martens

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91.
June 14th,
2007
4:26 pm

Before you start blaming India for carbon emissions, please take the population into account. On a per-capita basis, the carbon emissions are far far less than even the Netherlands, a so-called environmentally conscious country (let alone the U.S.).

— Posted by Rudra

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92.
June 14th,
2007
4:30 pm

Mr. Conniff, I think you've thrown us a real red herring by confusing two unrelated issues - the agricultural 'buy local' movement and the push for national loyalty in international trade ("Buy American").

The 'buy local' movement, as it relates to food, has to do with consuming fresher, healthier produce that is more in harmony with natural production and helps support

smaller, local farmers. This generally applies to fresh fruits, vegetables, and meat, and not to dried products like rice and pasta (which can be shipped and stored without losing quality).

The push for national loyalty in international trade ("Made in the USA", etc.) is about voluntary protectionism and supporting the national job market.

While there is growing concern about products' carbon footprint, I have never heard anybody say that importing manufactured goods is a serious contributor. Anybody making that argument is probably trying to ride the latest wave to promote a protectionist strategy. The 'buy local' agriculture movement, on the other hand, stresses a more environmentally friendly approach overall. While that does mean growing things locally and not importing them in freezer containers from halfway around the world, the carbon footprint is only one reason, usually behind quality, health, support for local jobs, and a sense of local community.

— Posted by Neil Laslett

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93.

June 14th,

2007

4:30 pm

As many here have mentioned you miss the point of the buy local movement by reducing the discussion to one only on a products carbon footprint. Money spent locally ends up in the location which has a huge impact on the local economy. Lets not forget that a products carbon footprint is not it's only environmental impact.

Large farming operations end up depleting the soil and then force us to use sythetic fertilizer which are made from petroleum. This fertilizer often runs off into local water supplies. And than we are left with a surplus that we don't need both forcing the price down and hurting the farmer and we find creative uses for a product we don't need.

Everything from corn syrup to the way we feed our animals is based on this subsidized food. The animals end up eating food they were never intended to eat. This food makes them sick and we then have to treat them with antibiotics.

It is true that if there is a large benefit to buying something from elsewhere than you should. For example coffee which isn't suited to grow here. But to say that buying a local ear of corn is worse for us an farmers than a product that was grown on a huge farm thousands of miles away is just misleading.

It is even more misleading to indicate it would hurt farmers to buy locally. The subsidies we put towards the food these farmers grow makes it very hard to see the true cost of the food to both us and the farmer. Currently a farmer is often forced to sell food below it's cost to produce because of the giant surplus we have created.

The bottom line is one should make educated decisions on the products and foods that they buy. In some cases the local food will lose out. But when you take into account the “true” cost more often than not buying local takes it almost every time.

— Posted by Noah

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94.

June 14th,

2007

4:42 pm

Buying local for me (after living in Europe for the last 10 years) is about having better quality produce, picked ripe, and therefore much healthier for me. A major plus is supporting local small scale farmers. The fact that it does not use jet fuel to get to me doesn't hurt. We need to encourage more small scale market gardens in the US like in Europe. We need food security and know-how again in our own country. This is not anti-foreign, it is just smart and practical. In a major disaster, Europeans could survive and would know what to do to keep themselves going—unlike those of us living in the US, who would be lost without water, electricity, or fuel.

As for the problems the US farmers (large scale corporations, not family farms) will have if other countries jump on the “local” bandwagon, perhaps they should be punished financially for not complying with Kyoto or doing more to lead the world in helping to stop the greenhouse gas problem.

— Posted by Susan

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95.

June 14th,

2007

4:49 pm

Farm families are disappearing rapidly as big corporations buy up land and force ecologically sustainable operations out of business through heavy chemical use. Our farm policies subsidize such practices and focus on cheap corn over healthy food. Americans find that a Twinkie is cheaper than a carrot, and since the factory-farmed produce tastes like cardboard, most opt for the processed foods. Buying local is a small step we can all take toward rescuing an agricultural, environmental, and food system that is barreling towards self-destruction as it drives rural farmworker wages below the poverty line, pollutes our air and water, and encourages eating habits that result in obesity. Energy consumption is only one part of the logic behind eating local. Eating local is also about supporting smaller businesses, since ConAgra and Monsanto will surely not market their products at the local farmers market. And many small operations use sounder ecological practices and also treat their employees better. After all, unlike the big corporations, they actually have to live on the land and deal face to face with their employees.

What I don't understand, Mr. Conniff, if I can buy my tomatoes from a local farm for a few months out of the year, then why would you advocate that I buy those that have traveled 3,000 miles to get there? The logic - and therefore the choice - is quite obvious to me.

— Posted by Betsy

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96.
June 14th,
2007
5:09 pm

Richard, you just don't get it!

— Posted by B H Sheahan

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97.
June 14th,
2007
5:18 pm

Buy local is not the same thing as buy American. As you point out, the average meal travels 1500 miles. That means it is probably grown in the US, in a distant state. I think you're mixing apples and Priuses here.

— Posted by Evelyn

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98.
June 14th,
2007
5:42 pm

I live in Half Moon Bay, California, smack dab in the middle of agriculturally rich areas and packed with local farmers. I believe in buying locally and number several farmers in my acquaintance; we even have farmers markets for veggies and locally grown flowers. Strangely enough, no one in the posts is talking about the price of these products. America is well fed mostly because good food is not just for the well to do, but also those of us who can't afford to pay in excess for these admittedly better tasting and fresher foods. I am an environmentalist in heart and I recycle and use the new light bulbs, and watch my water consumption, etc. But no one is talking about the price of a Prius (let alone an Escalade) or the price of these local vegetables, and how those of us who live on a fixed income can manage to buy all the new "green" toys. In a capitalistic society, everyone is able to strive to make more money. It is important that people recognize that "green is the new black," and once again the monied folks will do better at this than I will. Thus, a carbon footprint that saves me money is more than welcome.

— Posted by Lil Gluckstern

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99.
June 14th,
2007
8:30 pm

Let us not worry about the American farmer, because that is really agribusiness, large corporations, which lobby for our tax dollars for subsidy money.

The most stupid idea is making ethanol fuel from corn. resulting in an increase in price because of higher demand. Instead. we should drop the tariff on Brazilian ethanol, which has a \$0.54/gallon duty.

It is more energy efficient to make than US corn ethanol. - Also let us stop sugar subsidies of \$0.20 a lb and make ethanol from US sugar. For more, closer supply, hpw about importing it from Cuba.

Our government does little but cater to corporate donors and worries little about what is efficient and best for the country.

Buying local is fine for many foods. Fuji apples all year round is better. Agribusiness sells where the price is highest, regardless of transportation cost.

Do we need \$2 roses from Ecuador?

We are just very spoiled.

— Posted by Gunther Steinberg

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100.
June 14th,
2007
8:35 pm

Buying local is, of course, a political issue. Trying to convince people not to buy local is, certainly, another one. Between these two options, consuming local products seems to be a much wiser and responsible decision.

— Posted by Paul Firbas

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101.
June 14th,
2007
8:35 pm

Thanks for provoking thought.

Exum

— Posted by Exum B

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102.
June 14th,
2007
9:44 pm

Is Conniff saying that Europeans should somehow be dissuaded from buying local because the U.S. farming industry will suffer? But to continue the theme of looking at the larger picture, perhaps he should look at the complete environmental footprint of large scale agriculture in this country. The farming industry is extremely destructive to the environment. Polluted runoff from farmland and livestock operations has had a devastating effect on water quality and wildlife - - it is in fact the main source of surface water pollution in this country - - and a federal law has yet to be written to control the impact. Year after year, farmers have a stranglehold on lawmakers, who do virtually nothing to slow the environmental destruction. Perhaps diminished sales from Europe would be more effective. In fact, why shouldn't Europeans and other nations place a tax on American food imports that do not meet higher standards of environmental stewardship?

— Posted by Bill Schillaci
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103.
June 15th,
2007
3:30 am

I live in a Northern California community adjacent to many local farms. We buy our produce locally during the various seasons. Yes, the water is imported and we use slightly more oil based fuels to get to the markets. However, the pressure to develop those acres into new housing projects is tremendous. If a farmer knuckles under to the pressure to sell his land, what is the result? It's a vast number of new homes that create a HUGE carbon footprint and a loss of quality food and the undercutting of support to local enterprise.

— Posted by Scott MacLeod
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104.
June 15th,
2007
8:24 am

While I agree with most of the posts decrying the comparison Conniff tries to make between apples and autos there is an additional rationale for favoring local food. If one uses per unit retail cost comparisons (apples vs. autos) there is a clear logic to the buy local food position.

Also, one only needs to scratch the surface of Conniff's description of the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy as an "environmental group" to find that the

Bd. of Directors draws its membership mostly from energy and chemical companies, including such environmental stewards as Dow Chemical.

— Posted by Bruce

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105.

June 15th,

2007

8:55 am

Various products need to be assessed on their own terms. I would rather buy organic produce from California than local produce drenched with pesticide, but I'd rather buy local produce than produce from Mexico drenched with pesticide. Given the choice between local organics and California organics, I'd choose to support the local grower if the product is of comparable or superior quality.

As far as China is concerned, there is nothing that I've found that someone in China can't find a way of making cheaper and of inferior quality. If there is a decent Chinese product—grown, raised or manufactured—it is not long until some other Chinese supplier will find a way to undercut the producer with a substandard, even dangerous product (as the recent pet food and monkfish debacles make clear). This statement isn't xenophobic—there are resourceful and innovative Chinese producers whose reputation is being tarnished by sleazy and unregulated competitors. You can see it in every brand new floppy computer disks riddled with errors (now obsolete, but a real problem at the time that they were the essential and only means of data storage), the small electrics marketed by even the most upscale and elite brands that are cheap and destined for an early demise, and the scissors that won't cut from the “dollar stores.” What the government does is its business—for me, as a consumer, “Product of China” means “caveat emptor” (Latin for “let the buyer beware”). This is not localism or nativism—it's just plain common sense, until Chinese producers come up to the standards of health, safety and quality of the American and European producers and manufacturers they put out of business.

— Posted by Mirqa

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106.

June 15th,

2007

10:08 am

Richard Coniff has certainly come up with a way to stimulate a debate. Accusing consumers of being anti-foreigner because we want healthy/fresh/local food is absurd. It is a fact that produce from long distances loses much of its nutritional value. Taste is certainly another consideration. The qualitative difference in taste between a fruit or vegetable picked yesterday in West Virginia and sold at a DC farmers market is clearly different than a product that traveled all the way from California. Also, in an increasingly

disconnected world, it is fundamentally satisfying to have a connection and sense of commonality with the people who are our neighbors and grow our food.

I note that my comment is the 90th Mr. Coniff has received so far. Apparently, there are a lot of us out there who think buying local is important.

— Posted by Anthony Garrett

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107.

June 15th,

2007

10:35 am

I'm disappointed because I would have welcomed a reasoned analysis of the local food movement, since lately I've been considering buying local. However, this article is an example of a tired old formula used by journalists when they get lazy: choose a popular movement, point out a few reasons why it's not "all good" (as if you're speaking to an impossibly naive person), and then conclude that the movement isn't a good thing. Not to mention that this is logically invalid, you can write the same article about any movement, no matter how virtuous. A good journalist at least attempts to assess both sides, carefully consider the positives and negatives, and then make a conclusion based on the balance. Unfortunately, Conniff totally blew his cover, and revealed his irrational personal bias against the local food movement, by saying that local shoppers' motivation is often to "punish someone foreign". That is utterly hilarious. Who could possibly believe that is what is on the mind of your average person shopping the local food market?

— Posted by Jim

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108.

June 15th,

2007

11:02 am

While local food may be purchased sooner after it is picked and thus retain more vitamins, mineral content is also a concern. Different localities have different mineral content in their soils. An example is that the East coast has little to no selenium in its soil structures while California is full of it—in some places to a fault. Trace amounts of selenium are vital to human health. Thus no one should eat foods exclusively grown in Eastern soils. The same thing was learned about iodine via the goiter belt in the Midwest.

— Posted by Alice Wahl

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109.

June 15th,

2007

12:46 pm

Excellent article. I think buying local might make sense if one lived in Costa Rica, a land with bananas, citrus, coffee, etc. From a public health standpoint we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that modern agriculture has greatly improved nutrition by bringing a wide variety of fruits and vegetables to people at a price that they can afford. Are local tomatoes better tasting than store-bought? Sure, enjoy them while you can but don't pretend that buying local will save the planet or improve your health.

— Posted by Gary

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110.
June 15th,
2007
3:09 pm

A provocative article — but really misses the point. Conniff seems to ignore the change in the food product that has been associated with industrial agriculture that ships product long distances. Fruits and vegetables are being bred to be machine-picked and have a long “shelf life” to survive transport. Inevitably, taste and nutrition suffer. Yes, we, in cold-weather climates, can buy industrial tomatoes in winter that are shipped in. But they are a pale imitation of the rich taste of real, fresh tomatoes grown locally in summer.

Saying buy-local is anti-foreign is ridiculous.

— Posted by Chip

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111.
June 15th,
2007
4:54 pm

Your assumptions are incorrect, I believe. In Vermont, “buy local” has much more to do with economics than anything else. Models of money spent locally percolate throughout the community, fortifying rural areas without manufacturing as a base. It also fosters wonderful, unique artisan products not found in the Megamarts.

— Posted by MJ

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112.
June 16th,
2007
2:03 pm

So it seems that the point is that an unexamined knee jerk response is not good when considering what comestibles one should purchase. And is there any decision where this isn't true?

Having just watched the documentary called “The Corporation”, what swivels one’s head is that total lack of information that a consumer of the products of corporations (but also LLPs, partners, single owners) can face. So a carbon label, like a warning label or nutrition label or energy efficiency label, is a way to ensure the information one needs is available.

Of course, truth in labeling then becomes the issue.

Thanks for the articles. I’ve enjoyed them all.

— Posted by Barbara Byrne

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113.

June 17th,

2007

3:52 pm

The sensationalistic title “Don’t Buy Local” provides a hint of the careless logic and lack of information found in the article, especially as it applies to food. The author glosses over the most important reason for buying local fruits and vegetables — freshness and flavor. To say that buying local, “For starters, it’s more likely to hurt American farmers than help them.” reflects a naive understanding of American Agriculture. “Farmers” are a diverse group. Cotton farmers getting huge subsidies do not much resemble small family organic vegetable farms. Buying local certainly helps them, provides better tasting and more nutritious food, and (if grown organically) is much gentler on the environment. It is surprising, and disappointing, the article fails to make these points in its eagerness to be flashy and provocative.

— Posted by James Eisenstein

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114.

June 18th,

2007

11:48 am

I would love to see Conniff and Michael Pollan go at it, mano-a-mano!!!

— Posted by Ken