

The Locavore's Delusion

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A summary of:

The Locavore's Dilemma: In praise of the 10,000-mile diet

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In the last two decades, an increasing number of people have promoted the alleged benefits of replacing imported food with items produced within a 100 mile radius. "Locavores" tell us that doing this will heal the planet, create jobs, ensure a more reliable and nutritious food supply, and improve physical, spiritual, and societal health.

Locavorism, however, begs an obvious question: If things were so great in the past, why was the globalized food supply chain developed in the first place?

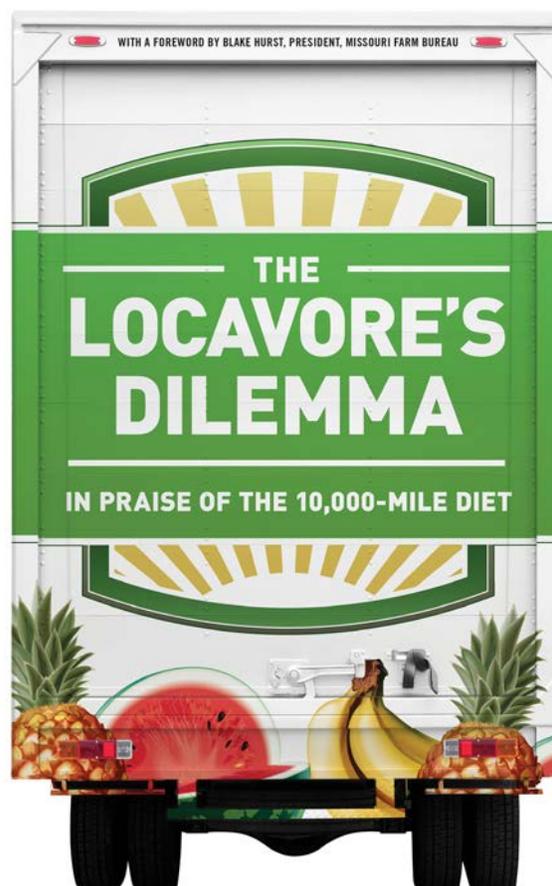
In our new book, *The Locavore's Dilemma: In praise of the 10,000-mile diet*, we explain why the current local food fad if taken to extremes can only deliver the world our ancestors were glad to escape. Indeed, the closest example today of our ancestors' way of life is in sub-Saharan Africa, where subsistence farmers grow and consume mostly local crops and livestock due to prohibitively expensive modern agricultural inputs and poor transportation. Far from being thriving sustainable communities, their world is one in which average cereal crop yields are at best one-fifth those of advanced economies, average incomes hover around \$1 a day, the probability of being malnourished is approximately one in three, and hundreds of thousands of people die every year from food- and water-borne diseases.

These figures shouldn't surprise us. Whatever the time or location, subsistence farming—which is ultimately what locavorism boils down to—only ever delivered poor nutrition and food insecurity. Humanity's lot only began to improve with urbanization (and its ever more complex division of labour) and long-distance trade. That the former could never occur without the latter was obvious to Plato when he observed in his Republic that to find a city "where nothing need be imported" was "impossible." In time, better production, transportation, and preservation technologies, along with productivity differences and timing of harvests between locations, made distance increasingly irrelevant. With distance no longer a factor, productivity differences and timing of production (harvest) became more important. The results were large

monocultures that delivered an ever more abundant, diversified, affordable, and nutritious food supply. Turning back the food clock can only result in a more expensive, less varied, and less nutritious diet. Higher prices, in turn, will also destroy many non-agricultural local jobs as local consumers and former foreign food exporters no longer have the means to purchase other goods produced in the locavores' community.

Another fact lost on locavores is that economic efficiency and sound environmental practices go hand in hand. For one thing, producing food in the most suitable locations and delivering it over long distances is much greener than manufacturing dairy products or growing vegetables near final consumers where these operations require large volumes of animal feed to make up for less productive pastureland, energy-guzzling heated greenhouses instead of natural heat, and massive amounts of water for irrigation rather than abundant rainfall. Large-scale monocultures also deliver a lot more food on a lot less land than more diverse but less efficient small local operations. Overall, we argue in *The Locavore's Dilemma*, the smaller the total area in active human use on the planet, the more environmentally friendly the landscape.

Locavores state that all other things being equal, local food is riper when it is picked, ensuring that it tastes better



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and has more value than food that has traveled long distances in various forms of storage. However, for most of the year many local products are not in season. Eating fresher food for a few weeks and preserved food during the remainder of the year cannot deliver a more pleasant and nutritious diet overall. Another consideration rarely addressed by locavores is that the fortification of food ranging from milk to flour can be accomplished much more effectively and cheaply (especially if vitamins and minerals are produced in large volumes) through large-scale facilities that serve a significant customer base.

Many locavores question food produced in countries with lower overall health, safety, and environmental standards. Paradoxically, however, export operations established by producers from advanced economies in poorer parts of the world typically implement state-of-the-art technologies and undergo significant scrutiny along the food supply chain, something that is often not the case for the small operators who sell their products at local farmers' markets. The issue is especially worrisome in light of the real dangers to our health that can be traced back to completely "natural" pathogens, such as *E. coli* and listeriosis, which are all around us. There are economies of scale in food safety, both in the production and the processing phases, which is why the food supplied

by "agri-business" is safer now than at any other time in human history.

Another frequent complaint of locavores is that we do not know who produces our food and that direct purchases from local producers will improve a community's social capital. Unfortunately, local food activists seem unaware that the development of food brands and grades was largely motivated by the need to assure customers that their purchases had not been adulterated (say, by adding water to milk). In fact, by contrast, a not insignificant number of small operators at farmers' markets have turned out to be resellers who peddle distant and conventional products under false pretenses (calling them "organic" and "local") because they can get away with it.

In some communities, consumers can agree to advanced seasonal purchases for pick up at times and locations determined by the farmer. By doing this, consumers "share the risk" of agricultural productions by accepting whatever is sent their way, including pest- or weather-damaged produce or inconsistent volumes of product. This further reminds us of the benefits of wholesalers and large retailers. For instance, when the kids are gone for a few days or extra guests show up, participants must either throw produce away (or compost it), or make additional purchases at the local grocery store. Gathering, inspecting, sorting, packaging, and delivering food items

where and when they are sought after, it turns out, is actually a service worth paying for, because it reduces waste and ultimately saves consumers money, leaving them better able to build local social capital in other ways.

The most preposterous claim of locavores is that their prescription increases food security. Yet, no local food system can ever be completely protected from insects, plant and animal diseases, drought, floods, earthquakes, and other natural catastrophes. Fortunately, trade liberalization insures that the surplus from regions with good harvests can be channeled to those with shortages. In the long run, good and bad harvests cancel each other out. Locavorism, by contrast, puts all of one's agricultural eggs in one regional basket. With food security as with many other forms of risk management, there is safety in numbers—in this case, multiple and geographically dispersed suppliers.

Locavorism is at best a marketing fad. At worst, it is a recipe for widespread human misery and ecological disaster. Higher standards of living and better environmental stewardship are only possible through ever greater specialization and long distance trade.

Reference

Plato. *The Republic, Book II*. <<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.3.ii.html>>, as of June 14, 2012. ■