

The Local Food Movement and Food Miles: Why Local Food Activists Should Focus on the Emotional Effects Before the Environmental Effects

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A controversial issue in the past decade has been whether eating locally is more or less energy efficient than buying from a conventional grocer. Over time, the majority of scholars have come to the agreement that it cannot be concluded that buying local food is always better for the environment and because of this discovery, there is a new conversation: what are the valuable strengths of the local food movement and why should consumers buy local? I argue that the main reason 21st-century consumers should buy local food is because of the positive effect it will have on their personal relationships, sense of place, and thus, their emotional wellbeing. This issue is significant because although the environmental benefits of buying local food are weak, there are many other strengths of buying locally that should be recognized and activists should continue to promote the local food movement.

IN RECENT DISCUSSIONS of the benefits of eating local food, a controversial issue in the past decade has been whether eating locally is more or less energy efficient than buying from a conventional grocer. (SC) Over time, many scholars have come to the agreement that it cannot be concluded that buying local food is always better for the environment. Those who affirm the wide-spread argument that there is not sufficient evidence that eating locally is necessarily more sustainable come from the fields of environmental science, rural development, and economics. While this consensus is apparent among the majority of the scholars, there are some researchers, such as Patrik Mouron, as well as many uninformed local food activists who claim that there are environmental benefits (SQ). Due to this controversy, a new scholarly discussion has begun about the other benefits of eating locally, since the environmental benefit of local food appears to be insufficient (DC). Within this conversation is also a new study about local food as a social movement and how it has gained such popularity apart from the environmental draw. Main contributors in this discourse community are scholars who study sociology and anthropology. In the words of Laura B. DeLind, the local food movement is “a process that must certainly involve food [but] also involves the cultivation of a civic “we-ness.” Ultimately, this is what gives (or should give)... the local food system definition and holding power” (DeLind 279). In sum, then, the issue is ultimately about what effect local food has on consumers. Because of statistical evidence alongside the research of scholars such as Patrick Mundler and George Criner, it can be established that eating local food does not have a significant effect on the sustainability of the food system. The position of scholars such as Amory

Starr, Laura B. DeLind, Ian Werkheiser and Samantha Noll’s position seems more convincing that there is a greater need for one to look at the more apparent benefits of local food such as the positive effect it has on human emotions. This issue is significant because although the environmental benefits of buying local food are weak, there are many other strengths of buying locally that should be recognized, the emotional benefits being the most important as local food is often misused as a status symbol (C/B). Therefore, I argue that while there are other draws to the “local food movement,” the main reason 21st-century consumers should buy local food is because of the positive effect it will have on their emotions and lifestyle (S/C).

The local food movement was sparked by activists who desired to decrease their ecological footprint, but recent research shows that the transportation of food does not have a substantial impact on the overall energy efficiency of a food system. Therefore, the environmental effects should not be our primary reason for eating local food, and greater attention should be given to other facets. An important term in this debate is “food miles,” which is the measurement of the fuel used to transport food from producer to consumer (Mundler 77). While reducing food miles is a valuable desire, it is quite insignificant in comparison to the energy that is created during the production of the food, such as the fuel used to irrigate, produce fertilizer and run farm equipment. In terms of the ecological footprint for food production, (which measures the impact humans have on the environment in terms of land,) the GHG emissions associated with the production phase, contributes 83% of the average U.S. carbon footprint for food consumption (Weber 3508). A study on the proportion

of energy used in the production and transportation by the total food system process presents similar results. The state of Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality, conducted by Martin Heller, found that food transportation is only 14% of the total energy used, while the stages that occur before transportation (agricultural production, processing, packaging) make up 44% of the total energy use (Heller 1). These statistics indicate that in comparison to food production, food transportation has a negligible effect on the overall energy efficiency; thus, one must consider other assets of the local food movement. The work of Mundler and Criner align with these statistics and the two scholars also argue that food transportation has a very small impact in comparison to the total energy costs of a food system. Mundler and Criner write that using food miles as an indicator of sustainability "is restrictive and... scientifically unwise," and rather argue that the sustainability of the food system "must be studied in its entirety and cannot be reduced only to the extent of food miles or even energy consumption" (Mundler 81). Despite the preconception that much of the conventional food system is less energy efficient than local farms, it is critical to acknowledge that local food is not more sustainable simply because of the decrease of energy spent in transportation. Unfortunately, a closer look at statistics and studies reveals that this decrease does not have a strong effect on the overall food system and thus should not be the main reason one buys locally.

In addition to the minor impact that transportation and food miles have on the food system, there is evidence that the sustainability of buying local food is dependent on the consumer traveling a very short distance. A common misconception of local food buyers is that local food is always more sustainable as the distance from farm to plate decreases with the decision to buy from a local source. While it is guaranteed that choosing local food will decrease the number of food miles, the benefits of this only apply if the consumer is close to the source of local food, which is unrealistic for many. Coley compares the carbon emissions of a customer driving to pick up local, organic produce to getting produce delivered to your house by a conventional grocer's supply system. He finds that if the distance of a customer's round trip to buy their local produce is more than 6.7 km (approximately four miles), then their carbon emissions are greater than the emissions from the conventional system which involves "cold storage, packing, transport to a regional hub and final transport to customer's doorstep" (Coley 150). This research is telling as it applies to both customers that receive their produce

through a doorstep delivery method and those that go to the grocery store and drive back to their home with their groceries—as both entail this final step of driving additional miles to get the food at home (Coley 150). Coley's research presents that yes, local food *can* be sustainable, but this is not the case for all. The efficiency of local food is not applicable to the majority of buyers, and as a result, local food cannot be claimed to be more energy efficient. In agreement with Coley are Gareth Edward Jones and his colleagues, whose research suggests that "it is currently impossible to state categorically whether or not local food systems emit fewer GHGs than non-local food systems" (Jones 270). Again, food miles are posed as a poor indicator of the sustainability of a food system and prompt a deeper investigation of the benefits of local food.

While the majority of scholars argue that local food is not consistently more sustainable than conventional food, Mouron and other researchers such as Stadig who take the LCA approach (Life Cycle Assessment) to local food oppose this generality due to research results (Mouron 114). The LCA approach considers both the energy flowing in and out of the food system and all the stages of the food chain. In terms of local food studies, LCA studies are distinct because they look at the energy that is used before and after the transportation stage (Jones 267). LCA analyses such as Mouron's often contradict with the claim that the environmental benefits of local food are insignificant and this is because the LCA approach is limited and cannot be used to argue that local food is advantageous for the environment. In Mouron's study comparing the energy efficiency of local apples and the apples produced to be sold at a conventional grocery store, he found that the local apples were more energy efficient as the overall use of CO₂ emissions was lower. Although his research suggests that local food does have an environmental benefit and is energy efficient, Mouron fails to consider that these benefits have limits to how one measures this efficiency, in his case the LCA approach. He reports that this was the result of local farmers "keeping the inputs of machinery, pesticides, and fertilizers low," in comparison to conventional producers (Mouron 114). It is important to note that his research also is confined in the way that it only focuses on the efficiency of growing apples and does not provide evidence for the efficiency of any other type of produce. Mouron's results aligned with those of Stadig who found that producing apples in New Zealand and shipping them to Sweden used more energy than producing the apples in Sweden despite the fact that apple production is significantly more efficient in New Zealand (Jones 267). Despite the validity of this

research, it is also limited to those who evaluate local food with the LCA approach and not other analyses. Likewise, the LCA approach is dependent on the food that is being produced and the energy efficiency of local apples cannot be assumed to be true of other foods. Because of this, food miles remain to be a weak indicator of sustainability as these results have limits. Therefore, it remains evident that local food activists and consumers should place a higher value on the other strengths of local food—such as its emotional effects.

While there is a lack of evidence to confirm the positive environmental effects of local food, there is evidence that buying local food is an enjoyable experience due to the “we-ness” it creates (DeLind 279). When one buys from a local farmer, it is likely that there will be face-to-face interaction and that the producer and the consumer will connect socially. Amory Starr, a sociologist, analyzes the local food movement and claims that one of the primary reasons for its popularity is the feeling of community and relationships it creates. She writes that through the local food movement “Food is transformed from a commodity to a pleasure made possible by human relationships” (Starr 484). When one buys locally, they connect with the seller, and the food that they cook and eat is given a location and a producer (Starr 484.). The food they buy is no longer just items they paid for from the grocery store, but the product of the hard work of the local food seller who provided for them in that way. This often enriches conversations around the table and one’s sense of place as they are eating something that was grown in a place that they are familiar with and by a human whom they have encountered (Starr 484). While it is true that human labor is also necessary for the production of conventional food, buyers do not experience an in-person exchange and thus lose this emotional benefit. When one buys local food, he or she feels more socially connected as they are often talking to the humans that grow their food or to other buyers. Simply by knowing the source of the food on their plate, consumers feel more connected to their area and to humanity as a whole, and this acts as one of the main reasons why eating local food is enjoyable.

Due to the positive emotional effect that buying local food has, there is also an increase in consumers’ quality of life—as they often view their “grocery trip” as an experience and not something to be checked off a to-do list. When writing about the experience of buying local food, Starr emphasizes, “not only do most participants willingly inconvenience themselves but also they do so with deepening joy and increasingly significant effects” (Starr 487).

Despite the fact that local food is generally more expensive and difficult to obtain, people continue to buy local food due to the enriching experience it provides (Starr 487). In the non-fiction book, *No Impact Man*, author Colin Beavan attempts to live without creating any waste for a year in New York City, and as a result, he eats local foods. It is important to note that this book was intended for a popular audience, yet Beavan’s reflection of his local food experience highlights the ongoing conversation scholars take part in—that local food is emotionally enriching. He writes how he hosted a local-food party and “whole conversations revolved around who got what where and how they adapted the recipes according to what they could find” and also about his appreciation for the farmers that provide his food (Beavan 182). Despite Beavan’s primary position as an environmentalist, he continuously acknowledges and values the emotional benefits that eating local food has, and this emphasizes its importance. Due to the positive experience local food creates, one’s lifestyle will be enhanced as it allows room for richer relationships with not only who you buy from but those you eat with.

The emotional benefits of the local food are also important because the movement needs to gain popularity for the right reasons, and joining to take part in a trend or to make a political statement will not reap benefits for all members of society. Ian Werkheiser and Samantha Noll share their interpretation of the local food movement as one with three sub-movements- the individual-focused sub-movement, the systems-focused sub-movement, and the community-focused sub-movement (Werkheiser 200). The individual-focused sub-movement includes numerous personal reasons why one would eat local food, such as health reasons or to support local farmers (203). The systems focused sub-movement represents activists who eat local food because they want to change how our food system operates and see a change in societal values (206). While all these sub-movements have benefits, they can also be obstructed and thus, Werkheiser and Noll argue that “the community-focused sub-movement that has the most potential to radically transform the global food system” (Werkheiser 200). This is because the “place building,” that local food provides often stirs a sense of belonging and dignity, which has a significant effect on how humans view themselves and the rest of the world (DeLind). Buyers should fill their fridges and pantries with local products simply because of its relational and emotional function. One’s decision to eat locally allows them to connect with the place they are located (resulting in a greater appreciation of his or her home) and, thus, an improved outlook on life.

DeLind also analyzes the numerous reasons why people join the movement and argues that the emotional benefits should be more widely recognized. Often, consumers use local food as a status symbol—to identify either as an environmentalist, follow a health trend or show their political affiliation (DeLind 273). In *No Impact Man*, Beavan confronts this negative attribute of liberal environmentalists and writes how he once was “a member of that class of liberals who allowed themselves to glide by on way too few political gestures and lifestyle concessions and then spent the rest of their energy feeling superior to other people who supposedly don’t do as much” (Beavan 16). His personal reflection shows the harm that often comes from one using local food and other sustainable practices to create a certain image. DeLind also argues that this is negative and disapproves of how activists are “shifting local food (as a concept and a social movement) away from the deeper concerns of equity, citizenship, place-building” (DeLind 273). Thus, when we evaluate the other main reasons people join the local food movement, it is evident that of these reasons, the emotional benefits should receive greater attention as they will help society rather than lead humans towards superficiality and stagnation.

The emotional benefits should be at the forefront of the local food movement due to the insufficiency of food miles as an indicator of sustainability and its positive impact on one’s own lifestyle and society as a whole. Acknowledging these benefits is the beginning of humans living lives that are more fulfilling and emotionally rich. Local food may not be the avenue to reducing greenhouse gases and decreasing our energy use, but it has the ability to connect strangers and bring a sense of unity and place. Further research is needed to evaluate how these emotional benefits affect different people groups and communities and how informed activists value the emotional benefits of local food in comparison to other facets. Additionally, further research should be done to determine the best way to measure the energy efficiency of local food systems because, as the Life Cycle Assessment approach shows, this leads to inconclusive results and the study of “food miles,” is not fully utilized. Yet, it is important to recall that the local food movement does not necessarily need to overlap with environmental discussion. As DeLind wrote, the local food movement “proceeds from the [false] assumption that without them [environmentalists] as full partners, the movement cannot be sustained in any felt, practiced, or committed way.” The abundance of positive emotional effects that one can gain from eating local food should

encourage consumers to continue their support of local food even if its environmental benefits are questionable.

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