

The Relocalization of Food: Values-Added Agricultureⁱ

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The word “locavore” was chosen by the New Oxford American Dictionary as their 2007 “word of the year.” They described a locavore as someone who shows a strong preference for foods made with locally grown ingredients and takes advantage of seasonally available foodstuffs that can be bought and prepared without the need for extra preservatives.¹ Some critics questioned the selection, suggesting that local foods might be just a passing fad. However, most people in the sustainable agriculture movement understand that the growing popularity of local foods is but the latest phase in a long-term trend that is fundamental transforming the American food system.

A few decades ago, practically all foods were local. Prior to World War II, nearly a third of all people in the United States lived on farms and most farm families produced much of their own food. Those who lived in small towns bought most of their food from local merchants who bought fresh produce, meat, milk, and eggs produced by local farmers. Even the large cities of those times were surrounded by truck farms, orchards, and dairies that provided most of the fresh produce, milk, and other perishable foods for those who lived in the cities. Of course, coffee, tea, and most spices were imported and a few times a year most folks splurged for oranges and bananas that had traveled more than a few miles. But until about 60 years ago, there was no need for the word locavore because food had always been mostly local.

The *delocalization* of the American food system began with the industrialization of American agriculture following World War II. The wartime munitions and chemical warfare industries were quickly converted to produce the nitrogen fertilizers and chemical pesticides that allowed American farms to specialize, mechanize, and grow larger in scale. Geographic specialization of the food system followed improvements in U.S. highways, particularly with the interstate highway system. Rail shipments of perishable foodstuffs had been slow, costly, and inconvenient for most food retailers. With better highways, California and Florida quickly became major centers of agricultural production and Americans no longer needed to eat in season, or even to preserve foods for off-season use. By the 1960s, regional supermarket chains – Kroger, Safeway, A & P – had replaced most local “mom and pop” grocery stores and by the 1970s fast food franchises – McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken – were “freeing housewives from their kitchens.” Today’s industrial food system is not only non-local, it’s global, with the average food item sold in America traveling something like 1500 miles.²

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Today, most Americans have no idea of where their food comes from, how it is produced, or whether any particular food item is in season at any particular time. Most wouldn't know how to prepare locally grown food from scratch, even if they knew where to buy it. However, it's important to remember that the transition from *local* to *industrial* mostly took place during the fifty-year span of the last half of the last century. It is equally important to remember that an oppositional food movement emerged almost as soon as the industrial food movement began. Today, the fastest growing segment of the food market is not fast foods, convenience foods, or inexpensive industrial foods but instead is “natural foods.” The local foods movement is but the latest phase of the natural foods movement, which was born out of rejection of the industrialization of agriculture and continues to grow with rising public skepticism concerning the overall integrity of the global industrial food system.

Whenever locavores are asked why they prefer local foods, freshness and flavor typically top most lists of priorities. However, taste is only one part of the local food story. The Slow Food website states, for example, “We believe that the food we eat should taste good; that it should be produced in a clean way that does not harm the environment, animal welfare or our health; and that food producers should receive fair compensation for their work.”³ The Slow Food movement is a worldwide organization with more than 80,000 members in 50 countries and about 12,000 members in 140 local chapters or *convivia* in the United States. Chefs Collaborative is a network of more than 1,000 American chefs who are promoting the joys of local, seasonal, and artisanal cooking. Their website proclaims, “Cultural and biological diversity are essential for the health of the earth and its inhabitants. Preserving and revitalizing sustainable food, fishing and agricultural traditions strengthen that diversity.”⁴ Most locavores are not only expressing a preference for freshness and flavor, they are expressing their support for a food system that has ecological, social, and economic integrity.

The natural foods movement began back in the 1960s with the “back to the earth” people who dropped out of the American mainstream. They produced their own food, bought food at farmers markets, and formed the first cooperative food buying clubs and natural food stores. They chose local foods not simply because they were concerned about freshness and flavor but because they were concerned about the health and environmental risks associated with the synthetic fertilizers and pesticides of industrial agriculture. Rachel Carson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, which sparked the environmental movement, had focused specifically on agricultural pesticides. The natural food movement spread far beyond the “hippie” communities during the 1970s and 1980s, as more people became aware of potential health, environmental, and social problems associated with industrial foods.

The growing market for natural foods laid the foundation for a booming market in organic foods during the 1990s, as the organic market grew an average rate of 20% per year, doubling every three to four years. Many of the early advocates of natural foods were vegetarians, so most of the early market growth in organic foods was for vegetables, fruits, grains, and soy products. Animal products, led by organic milk, began to break into organic markets in the late 1980s and continued to grow during the 1990s. Widespread use of antibiotics and growth hormones in industrial livestock operations seemed to be the major concerns for consumers of meat, milk, and cheese. Concern about the inhumane treatment of animals in large-scale confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs) has also helped fuel the demand for free range, pasture based, and

naturally raised meat and dairy products. In the fruit and vegetable industries, concerns for the maltreatment and economic exploitation of farm workers also grew as the operations became larger and more geographically concentrated.

Today, growing concerns about the lack of nutrition in industrial foods promises to become a major new driver of the natural foods movement. A number of scientific studies have indicated significant declines in the basic nutritive value of foods have occurred during the period of agricultural industrialization and more studies are under way.⁵ The American epidemics of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are all obviously related to diet. It's easy to blame these maladies on the sedentary, but high-stress, American lifestyle, which might well be a significant factor. But an equally if not more important factor could be that many of today's industrial foods are simply lacking in nutrients.

Health and nutrition concerns are fueling rapid growth in markets for grass-fed meat and dairy products. Scientific studies have documented that meat and milk from grass-fed animals are lower in fat and calories, higher in omega-3 fatty acids and conjugated linoleic acids (CLA), and higher in Vitamin E than are meats from grain-fed animals.⁶ All of these differences give grass-fed meat and milk products an advantage in heart-healthy diets. Animals finished on grasses or forages, rather than in feedlots, also have much lower levels of e-coli 0157-H7 virus, which is responsible for most serious e-coli related illnesses in humans. In addition, E-coli contamination typically occurs in large-scale, industrial processing facilities where it quickly spreads through the massive food distribution systems.

Best-seller books, such as *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser and *Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan, have raised public awareness of the lack of ecological, social, or economic integrity of an industrial, corporate, global food system. Americans are beginning to realize that the problems with today's mainstream food system are fundamental and systemic. Pesticide residues, junk foods, genetically modified organisms, growth hormones, antibiotic resistance, and inhumane treatment of animals, economic exploitation of farmers and farm workers, and now, lack of nutrition and e-coli contamination all have a common origin in our industrial food system. They are all symptoms of deeper social and philosophical flaws in the logic of industrializing food production and distribution. Industrial farming systems inevitably lead to degradation of the land and dependence on fertilizers and pesticides. Industrial food processing and distribution inevitably lead to exploitation of the farmers and workers who produce, process, distribute, and prepare our foods. Our industrial food system is using up the natural and human resources that must support its long run productivity; it quite simply is not ecologically, socially, or economically sustainable.

The locavore phase of the natural food movement is being driven by deeper political, ethical, and philosophical issues than the concerns that have driven the natural food movement of the past. The globalization of the food system and a growing dependence of Americans on imported foods are raising concerns for long run food security of the nation. The United States likely would have become a net importer of food products in 2007 if the value of the U.S. dollar had not plunged in relation to the Euro and other major international currencies making food imports more expensive. Americans are not going to abandon agriculture, but we could easily become as dependent on the rest of the world for our food as we are today for our oil. In a time of increasing

global unrest and a seemingly endless “war of terrorism,” many Americans are becoming interested in finding dependable sources of food closer to home – locally.

The ecological realities of declining fossil energy reserves and global climate change also are causing people to question the wisdom of their dependence on non-local foods. The world is not necessarily running out of fossil energy but oil production is nearing its peak, or has peaked, and future global petroleum production will be smaller in quantity and more difficult and costly to bring to market. Coal is most abundant remaining source of fossil energy but is a major emitter of greenhouse gasses and will be very expensive to use without exacerbating global climate change. Nuclear power also poses major environmental problems. Meanwhile, the demand for fossil energy continues to grow, particularly in industrializing countries like China and India. Higher energy costs will not only increase costs of transporting foods but also will raise costs of fertilizers and pesticides in food production and costs of food processing and preparation. Higher energy costs threaten the food security of all nations that choose to depend on a global, industrial food system. However, the world's poor and hungry will suffer most as food exporting countries shift agricultural resources to producing bio-fuel for the world's wealthy, which also will create an ethical burden for the wealthy, as least for those with a conscience.

If the ecological realities were not enough, the economic realities are equally bothersome. The U.S. economy is running on “less than empty” – on deficits. American consumers, the most important segment of the economy, are spending more money than they are able to earn. Even middleclass Americans have maxed out their credit cards and have now turned to borrowing against whatever equity they have in their homes. Today, many risk losing their homes after only modest rises in interest rates needed to prop up the value of the U.S. dollar. The national economy is in no better condition. The so-called economic growth of the past few years has been largely an illusion created by moving middleclass jobs to low-wage countries while bringing the cheaper manufactured products and most corporate profits back to America. In addition, the U.S. government continues to finance its trillion-dollar-and-growing military venture in the Middle East through deficit spending, financed by money borrowed from China and its other “trading partners.” More Americans are beginning to look closer to home for a source of food as means of surviving a potential economic catastrophe.

Regardless of their individual reasons, more Americans are looking for more local sources of foods. They don't trust the corporate food system or the government to maintain the ecological, social, or economic integrity of their foods. Their skepticism extends even to mainstream organics, which increasingly comes from large-scale, industrial organizations. Many people want more than government certification that their food is organic, natural, or grass-fed; they want to buy their food from people they know and trust. In fact, a number of scientific surveys over the past few years have indicated that for a number of reasons roughly three-fourths of American consumers have a strong preference for local foods.⁷ Many organic farmers have chosen not to become certified as organic, but instead chose to rely on personal relationships with their customers to validate the integrity of their products.

Affirming their judgment, the number of farmers markets in the U.S. more than doubled during the decade that organic foods were moving into mainstream supermarkets. For many people, relationships are more important than convenience. Farmers markets are becoming not

just a source of high quality, fresh foods, but also the focal point of vibrant, healthy communities, where people come to visit with their neighbors as well as to connect with *their* farmers. Consumer supported agricultural organizations (CSAs), roadside stands, on-farm sales, and other face-to-face venues offer similar opportunities to nurture personal relationships as well as ensure the ecological, social, and economic integrity of foods. As these various forms of local markets become more popular and offer wider varieties of products, many people have come to rely on them as their primary source of fresh foods, at least during local growing seasons.

CSAs also are evolving to meet the more varied wants and needs of more people. Multi-farm CSAs are becoming more common, where farmers share the responsibility of providing a wide variety of fresh local foods, week after week, during the growing season. *Grown Locally*, for example, is a cooperative venture of 15 farm families in rural northeast Iowa.⁸ They offer a variety of vegetables, fruits, meats, eggs, cheese, baked goods, flowers, soaps, and herbs. Most are available as CSA shares, standing orders, or week-by-week purchases. Their customers have the option of on-farm pick-up, local delivery points, or delivery to the door for an added charge. They offer different products and different delivery schedules for each season. A number of similar organizations exist in other states and their numbers are growing each season. They are making it easier for more people to eat locally and in season.

In addition to farmers markets and CSAs, access to good local foods is becoming more widely available in traditional retail food outlets. In these instances, the contact between customer and farmer may not be face-to-face, but the connection is still local and potentially personal. One of the new pioneers in the new higher-volume local foods movement is New Seasons Market, which has been the fastest growing retail food chain in Portland, OR and currently operates nine stores.⁹ New Seasons food stores look pretty much like any other modern supermarket, with delis, bakeries, and other amenities. However, virtually every item in the store is labeled with respect to not just the country but the “farm of origin.” They promote local-grown products and have long-term commitments with hundreds of local and regional farmers.

Another local foods pioneer is Good Natured Family Farms, a cooperative of thirty-some farmers in southeastern Kansas and southwestern Missouri.¹⁰ They have teamed up with Hen House Markets, a 13-store supermarket chain operated by Ball Foods Inc., a family corporation with a long history and strong commitment to the Kansas City community. The cooperative owns and manages their own Good Natured brand, which now includes an expanding line of branded food products. The Good Natured-Hen House “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” campaign has grown in retail sales of local products by 35% per year over the past several years, doubling in sales every couple of years. Some of their local products are organic, but their customers rely most on the integrity of the local producers.

These are but two of many examples of how local foods are moving into “higher-volume” retail food markets. In addition, the higher-volume local food movement is not limited to retail food markets and restaurants. More than 1000 public school districts and 95 colleges and universities have active programs to provide U.S. students with high quality, locally grown foods, and the numbers are growing too fast to keep track.¹¹ Local foods are also making inroads into nursing homes and health care facilities, increasing the physical well-being of the old as well as the young.

The natural food movement has changed over the years and will continue to evolve in the future. However, it will continue to be guided by the same ecological, social, and economic principles as in the past. When the Chefs Collaborative expresses a commitment to cultural and biological diversity, they are respecting a basic principle of ecological integrity. They are concerned about preserving and revitalizing “sustainable” food, fishing, and farming traditions. *Diversity* is essential for renewal, regeneration and thus is necessary for sustainability. Locavores also understand that sustainable agro-ecosystems are far more than collections of diverse individual physical and biological elements; ecological relationships matter. Sustainable agro-ecosystems are *holistic*. Finally, when locavore express a commitment to maintaining the productivity of the land, they are expressing a commitment to the principle of *interdependent*. Interdependent relationships are neither extractive nor exploitative but are mutually supportive and beneficial. The concerns of locavores may change but the basic ecological principles of *holism, diversity, and interdependence* will continue to guide the local foods movement.

When locavores express a commitment to food produced in ways that do not harm human health or animal welfare, they are respecting the basic principles of social integrity. Social principles arise from a set of common core values that transcend religion, philosophy, race, nation, and culture. The principle of *kindness*, whether to other people or animals, reflects the core values of empathy, compassion, and respect. The principle of *trust* reflects the core values of honesty, fairness, and responsibility. When locavores rely on relationships with local farmers they are respecting the principle of *trust*. When trusts are validated, relationships are strengthened and when trusts are violated, relationships are weakened. Finally, trust and kindness accomplish little without the *courage* to act. It takes courage to reject the culture of deception, inequity, irresponsibility, ruthlessness, and disrespect that characterizes the industrial food system. Regardless of whether relationships are face-to-face or once-or-twice-removed, relationships of integrity must be based on *trust, kindness, and courage*.

When the Slow Food organization states that farmers should be receive fair compensation for their work, they are respecting the basic principles of economic integrity. *Economic value* is determined by scarcity, meaning the quantity available relative to the quantity people are willing and able to buy. Economic value differs from intrinsic value in that the economy often places little value on things of great intrinsic value, such as landscapes, friendships, or ethics. However, farmers must produce economic value if they expect their customers to provide them with fair economic compensation for their work. *Economic efficiency* reflects the economic value produced relative to the economic value of the natural, human, and economic resources used to produce it. Local food systems must make efficient use of land, people, intellect, energy, and money if they are to survive economically. *Economic sovereignty* is the freedom to make informed choices, free from coercion or persuasion. In local food markets, people are free to make their own decisions and must accept responsibility for the consequences of their choices. If local food systems are to have economic integrity, they must respect the basic economic principles of *value, efficiency, and sovereignty*.

The integrity of the food system as a whole, meaning its completeness, strength, and soundness, depends on the extent to which these principles permeate all aspects of the systems. The integrity of relationships between and people the natural environment can be derived

directly from the principles of social relationships. Degradation and pollution of natural resources and the environment violate the principles of trust and kindness in relationships among people, both within or among generations. Furthermore, natural resources must be used efficiently to protect the intrinsic value of living in a clean and healthy natural environment as well as to create economic value. Ecological integrity depends on social and economic integrity.

Local food systems help build sustainable local communities. Sustainable communities are more than collections of people; relationships matter. Sustainable personal relationships must be holistic, diverse, and interdependent. Furthermore, social and cultural resources must be used efficiently to create things of intrinsic social value as well as to create economic value. Social integrity depends on ecological and economic integrity.

Finally, the local food economy also must be holistic, diverse, and interdependent. A degree of specialization and standardization may be necessary for efficiency, but a sustainable local economy must have economic diversity and economic relationships must be mutually beneficial, rather than extractive or exploitative. Economic relationships must be based on trust, rather than contracts and laws, and must reflect a sense of kindness and respect for others, including those of future generations. Economic integrity is inseparable from ecological and social integrity.

The concerns that will drive the local foods movement in the future may be different from those in the past, but future concerns will arise from continuing violations of the same ecological, social, and economic principles as in the past. An industrial food system is inherently exploitative and extractive and thus is fundamentally incompatible with the principles of ecological, social, and economic integrity. The local foods movement is not just about fresh and flavorful foods, it's about sustaining a clean and healthy environment, a strong and healthy society, and vibrant local economies. Local foods markets are not only *value*-added markets they are *values*-added markets – ecological values, social values, and economic values that define the principles of ecological, social, and economic integrity.

The local foods move movement also is based on the most fundamental of all human values – faith, love, and hope. It is driven by the growing realization that something is fundamentally wrong. Without faith, there would be no sense of right or wrong either in relationships among people or between people and the earth because without faith there would be no sense of purpose or meaning in life. Faith is belief without the possibly of proof, and there is no possibility of proving that life has purpose. We accept purpose by faith because it reflects core values that are deeply held in our heart and soul. The relocalization of foods is occurring because people believe, without proof, their relationships with other people and with the earth matter.

The local food movement also is driven by a growing concern for the well-being of the other living things that inhabit the earth, including other people and the future of humanity. Love is belief, without proof, in inherent goodness. We typically think of love in relation to a person, but we can also love an animal, object, place, or even an idea. Among the most important of loves, however, is the love of life. If we did not believe in the inherent goodness of life, there would be no concern for the continuation of life of earth and thus no concern for its sustainability. The relocalization of foods is happening because people believe in the goodness of life and thus that

we must find ways to meet the needs of life in the present without compromising the quality of life in the future. They are trying to create a food system that respects the goodness of all life.

Finally, hope is the belief in the *possibility* of goodness. The local food movement is driven by a growing sense that something better than the industrial food system of today is possible. Hope does not mean that success will be quick or easy or even that the odds favor success. Hope is about possibility rather than probability. The industrial food system was built by powerful economic interests and today's global food system is defended by political and economic interests even more powerful today. But people, by their individual choices and collective actions, are capable of overcoming all economic and political obstacles. The economy and the government are ultimately responsible to the people, because people create governments and economies and people allow these entities to exist. Economies, societies, and the even the world change, whenever people find the courage to act on their deeply held values.

Locavores choose local foods because they share the same basic ecological, social, and economic values as those in a host of other social movements related to environmental protection, social justice, and the rights of all people, including those of future generations, to life, to self-determination, and to the pursuit of happiness. The local food movement is part of a far larger social movement that environmental writer Paul Hawken refers to as the “largest movement in the world that no one saw coming”¹² and others refer to as the “creators of a new culture.”¹³ While these various movements pursue their individual agendas, they are helping to create a fundamentally better world. They are all people of faith, love, and hope. In the deeply held values of these people, there is hope for a better food system, a better nation, and better world. The relocation of food ultimately is about restoring meaning and goodness to life. It's about adding social and ethical values, to food, to agriculture, and to life. It's about faith, it's about love, and in the faith and love, there is always hope.

End Notes:

¹ UOP Blog, Oxford University Press, USA, “Oxford Word of the Year: Locavore,” <http://blog.oup.com/2007/11/locavore/>

² Rich Pirog, 2003, “Checking the food odometer: Comparing food miles for local versus conventional produce sales to Iowa institutions,” Special Report, Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Ames, IA. http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubs/staff/files/food_travel072103.pdf

³ Slow Foods International, http://www.slowfood.com/about_us/eng/philosophy.lasso

⁴ See Chefs Collaborative website: <http://www.chefscollaborative.org/>

⁵ For a list of peer review scientific studies documenting the health benefits or natural foods, see *The Organic Center*, <http://www.organic-center.org/>

⁶ For references, see “Health Benefits from Grass-Fed Products,” at *eatwild*, <http://www.eatwild.com/healthbenefits.htm>

⁷ Diane Conners, “Hunger Grows for Locally Grown Food: *Restaurants, grocery stores discovering a tasty advantage*, published by Great Lakes Bulletin News Service, 3/30/2005.

⁸ Visit the *Grown Locally* website at <http://www.grownlocally.com>

⁹ See *New Seasons Market*, <<http://www.newseasonsmarket.com/>>

¹⁰ See *Good Natured Family Farms*, <<http://goodnatured.net/>>

¹¹ For more information see, <<http://www.farmtoschool.org>> and <<http://farmtocollege.org>> and for case studies, see *Agriculture of the Middle*, <http://www.agofthemiddle.org/archives/2004/09/case_studies.html>

¹² Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest* (New York: Viking Press, 2007).

¹³ Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000).