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Food That Travels Well

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THE term "food miles" -- how far food has traveled before you buy it -- has entered the enlightened lexicon. Environmental groups, especially in Europe, are pushing for labels that show how far food has traveled to get to the market, and books like Barbara Kingsolver's "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life" contemplate the damage wrought by trucking, shipping and flying food from distant parts of the globe.

There are many good reasons for eating local -- freshness, purity, taste, community cohesion and preserving open space -- but none of these benefits compares to the much-touted claim that eating local reduces fossil fuel consumption. In this respect eating local joins recycling, biking to work and driving a hybrid as a realistic way that we can, as individuals, shrink our carbon footprint and be good stewards of the environment.

On its face, the connection between lowering food miles and decreasing greenhouse gas emissions is a no-brainer. In Iowa, the typical carrot has traveled 1,600 miles from California, a potato 1,200 miles from Idaho and a chuck roast 600 miles from Colorado. Seventy-five percent of the apples sold in New York City come from the West Coast or overseas, the writer Bill McKibben says, even though the state produces far more apples than city residents consume. These examples just scratch the surface of the problem. In light of this market redundancy, the only reasonable reaction, it seems, is to count food miles the way a dieter counts calories.

But is reducing food miles necessarily good for the environment? Researchers at Lincoln University in New Zealand, no doubt responding to Europe's push for "food miles labeling," recently published a study challenging the premise that more food miles automatically mean greater fossil fuel consumption. Other scientific studies have undertaken similar investigations. According to this peer-reviewed research, compelling evidence suggests that there is more -- or less -- to food miles than meets the eye.

It all depends on how you wield the carbon calculator. Instead of measuring a product's carbon footprint through food miles alone, the Lincoln University scientists expanded their equations to include other energy-consuming aspects of production -- what economists call "factor inputs and externalities" -- like water use, harvesting techniques, fertilizer outlays, renewable energy applications, means of transportation (and the kind of fuel used), the amount of carbon dioxide absorbed during photosynthesis, disposal of packaging, storage procedures and dozens of other cultivation inputs.

Incorporating these measurements into their assessments, scientists reached surprising conclusions. Most notably, they found that lamb raised on New Zealand's clover-choked pastures and shipped 11,000 miles by boat to Britain produced 1,520 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions per ton while British lamb produced 6,280 pounds of carbon dioxide per ton, in part because poorer British pastures force farmers to use feed. In other words, it is four times more energy-efficient for Londoners to buy lamb imported from the other side of the world than to buy it from a producer in their backyard. Similar figures were found for dairy products and fruit.

These life-cycle measurements are causing environmentalists worldwide to rethink the logic of food miles. New Zealand's most prominent environmental research organization, Landcare Research-Manaaki Whenua, explains that localism "is not always the most environmentally sound solution if more emissions are generated at other stages of the product life cycle than during transport." The British government's 2006 Food Industry Sustainability Strategy similarly seeks to consider the environmental costs "across the life cycle of the produce," not just in transportation.

"Eat local" advocates -- a passionate cohort of which I am one -- are bound to interpret these findings as a threat. We shouldn't. Not only do life cycle analyses offer genuine opportunities for environmentally efficient food production, but they also address several problems inherent in the eat-local philosophy.

Consider the most conspicuous ones: it is impossible for most of the world to feed itself a diverse and healthy diet through exclusively **local food** production -- food will always have to travel; asking people to move to more fertile regions is sensible but alienating and unrealistic; consumers living in developed nations will, for better or worse, always demand choices beyond what the season has to offer.

Given these problems, wouldn't it make more sense to stop obsessing over food miles and work to strengthen comparative geographical advantages? And what if we did this while streamlining transportation services according to fuel-efficient standards? Shouldn't we create development incentives for regional nodes of food production that can provide sustainable produce for the less sustainable parts of the nation and the world as a whole? Might it be more logical to conceptualize a hub-and-spoke system of food production and distribution, with the hubs in a food system's naturally fertile hot spots and the spokes, which travel through the arid zones, connecting them while using hybrid engines and alternative sources of energy?

As concerned consumers and environmentalists, we must be prepared to seriously entertain these questions. We must also be prepared to accept that buying local is not necessarily beneficial for the environment. As much as this claim violates one of our most sacred assumptions, life cycle assessments offer far more valuable measurements to gauge the environmental impact of eating. While there will always be good reasons to encourage the growth of sustainable **local food** systems, we must also allow them to develop in tandem with what could be their equally sustainable global counterparts. We must accept the fact, in short, that distance is not the enemy of awareness.

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