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A bitter reality

Choose local food for the taste? Sure. But if you're convinced you're saving the world, think again.

By [Tom Keane](#)

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“Local food” is all the rage, touted by adherents as offering better food, an environmentally responsible lifestyle, and self-sufficient communities. The first of those claims is sometimes true. Local tomatoes and corn may well taste better than those from afar. Beyond that, though, the local food movement is an affectation based on bad logic and bad economics, one that, widely adopted, would actually harm the environment and potentially impoverish millions. Particularly here in New England, it would also turn mealtimes into dull, pallid affairs.

Luckily, chances are slim that most of us will become ardent “locavores” (the most extreme of whom will eat only foods sourced within 100 miles of their homes). We like bananas and pineapples, want fresh vegetables year round, and enjoy olive oil and balsamic vinegar on our salads. Principles have their limits, and even as we might pay homage to the wonders of local foods, most of us are not about to give up those or the myriad other things we eat and drink that have to travel a distance.

And that's not a problem, because local food is not greener food. Locavores' green claims rest on the seemingly obvious assumption that transporting foods a long distance is environmentally taxing. But, in fact, shipping is a small portion of the total carbon footprint of any foodstuff, averaging just 4 percent, according to a 2008 Carnegie Mellon University analysis. It's the production of the food itself that is far more damaging, and it's here that the mega-farms some decry have an edge. They produce more with fewer people, can effectively use machinery, are located in places where conditions are ideal for growing, and have the skills and know-how to maximize food production per acre. That's the reason local tomatoes are so much more expensive than those shipped from California and Florida: They are more resource-intensive to produce.

Which gets us to the biggest piece of nonsense trumpeted by locavores: the dream of the self-sustaining local economy. I understand some get a warm and fuzzy feeling about family farms and getting to know the hard-working folks who produce their food. It may get us back in touch with our roots, but it's a ridiculous way to run an economy. Most of us intuitively understand that it would be irrational to have, say, microchip factories in every city and town in America, but for some reason we still cling to the notion that it's better if we have farmers scattered all about.

Far from it. The hallmark of civilization has been specialization. Grain is best grown on the Great Plains because the region is blessed with the right soil, terrain, and climate. New England, on the other hand, is good for fishing and producing cranberries, maple syrup, and cheeses, to name a few, because of our unique natural resources and our skills. If locavores really had their way, the residents of the Great Plains would never get to taste our lobsters, cranberry juice, and other products, eventually hurting our fishing and farming industries. This goes back to one of the classic principles of economics: Trade is good. It allows everybody to do better, not only in material terms, but also in terms of enriching the quality of their lives. Personally, I think I'm better off enjoying a good bar of chocolate now and then. If locavores really had their way, that opportunity would be lost to me.

But take this further, beyond the United States and to the entire world. Suppose, for instance, that we all did become locavores, swearing off coffee. All we'd end up doing would be hurting the people who do grow coffee beans. Countries such as Colombia and Ethiopia depend upon coffee for a significant portion of their gross domestic product. If people elsewhere decided to no longer buy coffee -- or even simply reduced coffee consumption because of some sense that "I should try to eat local" -- then those already marginal countries would become much poorer. Think through the implications, and the people who would suffer would be those who could least afford it.

Don't get me wrong. I have no objection to buying delicious foods that happen to be locally grown. But to buy merely because something is local smacks of nativism and protectionism. Locavores argue that there is an ethical dimension to their movement. There is. But not one that works in its favor.

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