



Food Miles: Should We Be Buying Food From Abroad?

RELU Science Debate - 17 March 2006

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Purpose... and caveats

Clarify what we're talking about, why it's a problem...

Review some recommendations so far

Focus on who is missing from the debate

Suggest some questions for discussion

Offer 'non-expert' views from insider/outsider perspective to stimulate debate...

What's the issue?

Food Miles: *the distance food travels from farm to plate/field to fork...*

According to Wikipedia

Food miles is an expression of a concept that the mileage of food before it reaches the consumer (or the plate) is a good indicator for the environmental impact of the food and its components. Recent findings indicate that it is not only how far the food has travelled but how it has travelled that is important to consider. The positive environmental effects of specialist organic farming may be offset by increased transportation, unless it is produced by local farms. But even then the logistics and affects on other local traffic may play a big role. Also, many trips by personal cars to external shopping centres would have a negative environmental impact compared to a few truck loads to neighbourhood stores that can easily be accessed by walking or biking.

What's the problem? – anecdotal...

- Anecdotal: Since 1970, 60% of the UK's apple orchards have been lost, we now import ½ million tonnes a year, half from outside the EU and this is a crop ideally suited to our climate
- In 1997, UK imported 126 million litres of liquid milk and exported 270 million. Logical?
- Food processing: Lincolnshire potatoes to Bristol for washing; fish from Aberdeen to Cornwall for smoking, etc. Waste generation through packaging.
- Food travels 50% further than it did 20 years ago; 70% of our organic vegetables come from overseas (Waitrose gets 85% from the UK); flying in one calorie of lettuce from Los Angeles uses 127 calories in Aviation fuel
- Soil Association tracked 26 items in basket of groceries – in total travelled distance of 241,000 miles, one way trip to the moon!

Sources: The Logistics Business; David McCandless, BBC Olive Magazine

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Why's it so bad? ... the evidence

- Environmental, social & economic cost from food transport significant – estimated at **£9 billion/ year!**
- Food transport accounted for estimated 30 billion vehicle km in 2002
- Food transport accounts for 25% of all HGV vehicle km in UK
- Food transport produced 19 million tonnes of carbon dioxide in 2002 (2%)
- Significant emissions of air pollutants
- Economic costs: congestion; road accidents; infrastructure; emissions (CO₂, air pollutants); noise pollution

Source: Defra Study 2006 – *The Validity of Food Miles as an Indicator of Sustainable Development*, Paul Watkiss, AEA Technology

What can be done about it?

- Sourcing food more locally where appropriate
Consumer awareness/ labelling; public procurement; support local food initiatives (also local processing!)
- Reducing car food shopping
Home delivery, Support for local and in-town shops, provision of cycle/ pedestrian access
- Reducing transport impacts
Cleaner vehicles, Improved logistics, Rail freight
- Internalising social costs of transport (full cost accounting)
- Improving the wider sustainability of the food chain
From energy efficiency to ethical trading

Source: Defra Study 2006 – *The Validity of Food Miles as an Indicator of Sustainable Development*, Paul Watkiss presentation, AEA Technology; underlined comments added by M.Mehra

Who is involved?

LIST OF ACTORS...

- ☐ Input suppliers
- ☐ Logisticians / Planners
- ☐ Farmers/ Fishers/ Producers
- ☐ Producer country governments
- ☐ Policy makers
- ☐ Traders
- ☐ Workers
- ☐ Processors / manufacturers
- ☐ Wholesalers / retailers
- ☐ Caterers
- ☐ Consumers
- ☐ Scientists
- ☐ Pressure groups/ activists



Source: Adapted from Geoff Tansey, 2006

Who is missing?

Developing countries/ Emerging Powers:

E.g. India, China, Brazil as producers and consumers – changing consumption patterns



Minority Ethnic Consumers:

Ethnic minorities account for 7% of UK population, but disproportionately large consumers of 'exotic foods' – including much of fish imported

Minority caterers – Chinese & Indian, top 1 and 2 in UK



What are we striving for?

Food policy that is...

- ✓ sustainable
- ✓ secure
- ✓ safe
- ✓ sufficient and nutritious
- ✓ equitable
- ✓ culturally appropriate
- ✓ diet for all,
forever...

Source: Geoff Tansey, March 2006

Questions for discussion...

Starting Principle: - Rumsfeld theorem:

known knowns, unknown knowns, unknown unknowns...

- **How can the debate be more inclusive?**
 - factoring in **growth in agricultural exports** from developing countries, including amongst themselves (e.g. Soya from Brazil to China);
 - **needs of producers** (especial poor and marginal farmers/ fishers);
 - as well as **changes in production and consumption** systems as middle-income countries transition economically & attendant **natural resource pressures**
 - and **minority ethnic communities** in the UK
- **How can we deal with risk & external shocks?** e.g energy prices (oil peaked at \$70/ barrel) and impact of climate change
- **How can we move towards full-cost accounting?** e.g. also costs of US navy policing global shipping lanes

Thank You

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