



# Food Miles: Should we be buying food from abroad?

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# The Local Food Debate

- It's not just about the global environment!
- In 2000 we undertook a study for MAFF on the relations between farmers and incomers.
- We asked rural residents about food purchases expecting to find a growing interest in local food.
- We expected the alternative food economy to be driven by health, environmental and local concerns .... in that order

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- But the priorities were reversed.
- Purchases of local food were greater than organic.
- Three-quarters of the sample claimed to purchase some food produced on local farms.
- Regular weekly purchases were claimed by 41% of respondents (compared to 21% for organic).
- Why? – overwhelmingly residents desire to support local farm and retail businesses.

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- I coined a term for this – ‘defensive localism’ - but was inclined to be a little disparaging, seeing this as not particularly enlightened or progressive.
- Just how ‘alternative’ or ‘radical’ is it to buy milk from an intensive dairy farm that happens to be on your doorstep?!
- As an advocate of sustainable agriculture, my own answer at the time was “not very”.

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- But a year later Foot & Mouth struck!
- A year or so after - the Government published its Sustainable Farming & Food Strategy.
- When some months later we interviewed farmers in north and west Devon we hit on stress and despair.

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- The farmers who were coping best were those with ‘social capital’ – those linked into the local and wider community through economic and social ties.
- Such ties might well be through local retailing.
- Put the research experiences together, I found myself pondering on the ‘social’ component of sustainability.

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- The Government's Sustainable Farming & Food Strategy does not help a great deal in defining the 'social' leg of agricultural sustainability.
- So I have returned with renewed interest to defensive localism.
- Why the positive evaluation of farming?
- It's to do with connections and connectedness.
- Connections are progressive, even virtuous – community, solidarity, a 'moral' economy.

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- Local food is not just about saving the rain forests through reducing food miles.
- Not even only about 'Eat the View', thereby saving local landscapes & biodiversity.
- But also about communities that connect (including urban-rural inter-connection).
- Is it too fanciful or utopian to suggest that connections are at the root of social inclusion and social harmony?

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- And, therefore, that local food, in facilitating connection, is part of an answer to social needs as well as to economic and environmental ones.
- Such notions are far from fanciful - re-connection is a political and moral imperative.
- To conclude: policies that promote and support local food initiatives are a plus for social and economic sustainability, for local environmental sustainability, and probably for global environmental sustainability too.