

Good food?

If you think you can make the planet better by clever shopping, think again. You might make it worse



“You don’t have to wait for government to move... the really fantastic thing about Fairtrade is that you can go shopping!” So said a representative of the Fairtrade movement in a British newspaper this year. Similarly Marion Nestle, a

nutritionist at New York University, argues that “when you choose organics, you are voting for a planet with fewer pesticides, richer soil and cleaner water supplies.”

The idea that shopping is the new politics is certainly seductive. Never mind the ballot box: vote with your supermarket trolley instead. Elections occur relatively rarely, but you probably go shopping several times a month, providing yourself with lots of opportunities to express your opinions. If you are worried about the environment, you might buy organic food; if you want to help poor farmers, you can do your bit by buying Fairtrade products; or you can express a dislike of evil multinational companies and rampant globalisation by buying only local produce. And the best bit is that shopping, unlike voting, is fun; so you can do good and enjoy yourself at the same time.

Sadly, it’s not that easy. There are good reasons to doubt the claims made about three of the most popular varieties of “ethical” food: organic food, Fairtrade food and local food (see pages 71-73). People who want to make the world a better place cannot do so by shifting their shopping habits: transforming the planet requires duller disciplines, like politics.

Buy organic, destroy the rainforest

Organic food, which is grown without man-made pesticides and fertilisers, is generally assumed to be more environmentally friendly than conventional intensive farming, which is heavily reliant on chemical inputs. But it all depends what you mean by “environmentally friendly”. Farming is inherently bad for the environment: since humans took it up around 11,000 years ago, the result has been deforestation on a massive scale. But following the “green revolution” of the 1960s greater use of chemical fertiliser has tripled grain yields with very little increase in the area of land under cultivation. Organic methods, which rely on crop rotation, manure and compost in place of fertiliser, are far less intensive. So producing the world’s current agricultural output organically would require several times as much land as is currently cultivated. There wouldn’t be much room left for the rainforest.

Fairtrade food is designed to raise poor farmers’ incomes. It is sold at a higher price than ordinary food, with a subsidy passed back to the farmer. But prices of agricultural commodities are low because of overproduction. By propping up the price, the Fairtrade system encourages farmers to produce more of these commodities rather than diversifying into other crops and so depresses prices—thus achieving, for most farmers, exactly the opposite of what the initiative is intended to do. And since only a small fraction of the mark-up on Fairtrade foods actually goes to the farmer—most goes to the retailer—

the system gives rich consumers an inflated impression of their largesse and makes alleviating poverty seem too easy.

Surely the case for local food, produced as close as possible to the consumer in order to minimise “food miles” and, by extension, carbon emissions, is clear? Surprisingly, it is not. A study of Britain’s food system found that nearly half of food-vehicle miles (ie, miles travelled by vehicles carrying food) were driven by cars going to and from the shops. Most people live closer to a supermarket than a farmer’s market, so more local food could mean more food-vehicle miles. Moving food around in big, carefully packed lorries, as supermarkets do, may in fact be the most efficient way to transport the stuff.

What’s more, once the energy used in production as well as transport is taken into account, local food may turn out to be even less green. Producing lamb in New Zealand and shipping it to Britain uses less energy than producing British lamb, because farming in New Zealand is less energy-intensive. And the local-food movement’s aims, of course, contradict those of the Fairtrade movement, by discouraging rich-country consumers from buying poor-country produce. But since the local-food movement looks suspiciously like old-fashioned protectionism masquerading as concern for the environment, helping poor countries is presumably not the point.

Appetite for change

The aims of much of the ethical-food movement—to protect the environment, to encourage development and to redress the distortions in global trade—are admirable. The problems lie in the means, not the ends. No amount of Fairtrade coffee will eliminate poverty, and all the organic asparagus in the world will not save the planet. Some of the stuff sold under an ethical label may even leave the world in a worse state and its poor farmers poorer than they otherwise would be.

So what should the ethically minded consumer do? Things that are less fun than shopping, alas. Real change will require action by governments, in the form of a global carbon tax; reform of the world trade system; and the abolition of agricultural tariffs and subsidies, notably Europe’s monstrous common agricultural policy, which coddles rich farmers and prices those in the poor world out of the European market. Proper free trade would be by far the best way to help poor farmers. Taxing carbon would price the cost of emissions into the price of goods, and retailers would then have an incentive to source locally if it saved energy. But these changes will come about only through difficult, international, political deals that the world’s governments have so far failed to do.

The best thing about the spread of the ethical-food movement is that it offers grounds for hope. It sends a signal that there is an enormous appetite for change and widespread frustration that governments are not doing enough to preserve the environment, reform world trade or encourage development. Which suggests that, if politicians put these options on the political menu, people might support them. The idea of changing the world by voting with your trolley may be beguiling. But if consumers really want to make a difference, it is at the ballot box that they need to vote. ■



Voting with your trolley

Can you really change the world just by buying certain foods?

HAS the supermarket trolley dethroned the ballot box? Voter turnout in most developed countries has fallen in recent decades, but sales of organic, Fairtrade and local food—each with its own political agenda—are growing fast. Such food allows shoppers to express their political opinions, from concern for the environment to support for poor farmers, every time they buy groceries. And shoppers are jumping at the opportunity, says Marion Nestle, a nutritionist at New York University and the author of “Food Politics” (2002) and “What to Eat” (2006). “What I hear as I talk to people is this phenomenal sense of despair about their inability to do anything about climate change, or the disparity between rich and poor,” she says. “But when they go into a grocery store they can do something—they can make decisions about what they are buying and send a very clear message.”

Those in the food-activism movement agree. “It definitely has a positive effect,” says Ian Bretman of Fairtrade Labelling

Organisations (FLO) International, the Fairtrade umbrella group. Before the advent of ethical and organic labels, he notes, the usual way to express political views using food was to impose boycotts. But such labels make a political act out of consumption, rather than non-consumption—which is far more likely to produce results, he suggests. “That’s how you build effective, constructive engagement with companies. If you try to do a boycott or slag them off as unfair or evil, you won’t be able to get them round the table.”

Consumers have more power than they realise, says Chris Wille of the Rainforest Alliance, a conservation group. “They are at one end of the supply chain, farmers are at the other, and consumers really do have the power to send a message back all the way through that complicated supply chain,” he explains. “If the message is frequent, loud and consistent enough, then they can actually change practices, and we see that happening on the ground.”

The \$30 billion organic-food industry “was created by consumers voting with their dollars,” says Michael Pollan, the author of “The Omnivore’s Dilemma” (2006), another of this year’s crop of books on food politics. Normally, he says, a sharp distinction is made between people’s actions as citizens, in which they are expected to consider the well-being of society, and their actions as consumers, which are assumed to be selfish. Food choices appear to reconcile the two.

How green is your organic lettuce?

Yet even an apparently obvious claim—that organic food is better for the environment than the conventionally farmed kind—turns out to be controversial. There are many different definitions of the term “organic”, but it generally involves severe restrictions on the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers and a ban on genetically modified organisms. Peter Melchett of the Soil Association, Britain’s leading organic lobby group, says that environmental concerns, rather than health benefits, are now cited by British consumers as their main justification for buying organic food. (There is no clear evidence that conventional food is harmful or that organic food is nutritionally superior.)

But not everyone agrees that organic farming is better for the environment. Perhaps the most eminent critic of organic farming is Norman Borlaug, the father of

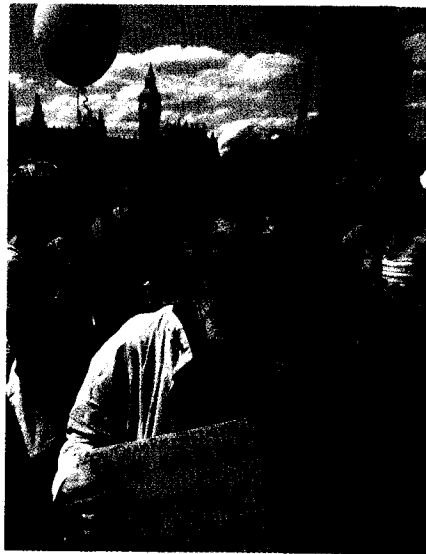
▶ the “green revolution”, winner of the Nobel peace prize and an outspoken advocate of the use of synthetic fertilisers to increase crop yields. He claims the idea that organic farming is better for the environment is “ridiculous” because organic farming produces lower yields and therefore requires more land under cultivation to produce the same amount of food. Thanks to synthetic fertilisers, Mr Borlaug points out, global cereal production tripled between 1950 and 2000, but the amount of land used increased by only 10%. Using traditional techniques such as crop rotation, compost and manure to supply the soil with nitrogen and other minerals would have required a tripling of the area under cultivation. The more intensively you farm, Mr Borlaug contends, the more room you have left for rainforest.

What of the claim that organic farming is more energy-efficient? Lord Melchett points out for example that the artificial fertiliser used in conventional farming is made using natural gas, which is “completely unsustainable”. But Anthony Trewavas, a biochemist at the University of Edinburgh, counters that organic farming actually requires more energy per tonne of food produced, because yields are lower and weeds are kept at bay by ploughing. And Mr Pollan notes that only one-fifth of the energy associated with food production across the whole food chain is consumed on the farm: the rest goes on transport and processing.

The most environmentally benign form of agriculture appears to be “no till” farming, which involves little or no ploughing and relies on cover crops and carefully applied herbicides to control weeds. This makes it hard to combine with organic methods (though some researchers are trying). Too rigid an insistence on organic farming’s somewhat arbitrary rules, then—copper, a heavy metal, can be used as an organic fungicide because it is traditional—can actually hinder the adoption of greener agricultural techniques. Alas, shoppers look in vain for “no till” labels on their food—at least so far.

Fair enough

What about Fairtrade? Its aim is to address “the injustice of low prices” by guaranteeing that producers receive a fair price “however unfair the conventional market is”, according to FLO International’s website. In essence, it means paying producers an above-market “Fairtrade” price for their produce, provided they meet particular labour and production standards. In the case of coffee, for example, Fairtrade farmers receive a minimum of \$1.26 per pound for their coffee, or \$0.05 above the market price if it exceeds that floor. This premium is passed back to the producers to spend on development programmes. The market for Fairtrade products is much smaller than



It makes me feel so good

that for organic products, but is growing much faster: it increased by 37% to reach €1.1 billion (\$1.4 billion) in 2005. Who could object to that?

Economists, for a start. The standard economic argument against Fairtrade goes like this: the low price of commodities such as coffee is due to overproduction, and ought to be a signal to producers to switch to growing other crops. Paying a guaranteed Fairtrade premium—in effect, a subsidy—both prevents this signal from getting through and, by raising the average price paid for coffee, encourages more producers to enter the market. This then drives down the price of non-Fairtrade coffee even further, making non-Fairtrade farmers poorer. Fairtrade does not address the basic problem, argues Tim Harford, author of “The Undercover Economist” (2005), which is that too much coffee is being produced in the first place. Instead, it could even encourage more production.

Mr Bretman of FLO International disagrees. In practice, he says, farmers cannot afford to diversify out of coffee when the price falls. Fairtrade producers can use the premiums they receive to make the necessary investments to diversify into other crops. But surely the price guarantee actually reduces the incentive to diversify?

Another objection to Fairtrade is that certification is predicated on political assumptions about the best way to organise labour. In particular, for some commodities (including coffee) certification is available only to co-operatives of small producers, who are deemed to be most likely to give workers a fair deal when deciding how to spend the Fairtrade premium. Coffee plantations or large family firms cannot be certified. Mr Bretman says the rules vary from commodity to commodity, but are intended to ensure that the Fairtrade system helps those most in need. Yet limiting certification to co-ops means “missing

out on helping the vast majority of farm workers, who work on plantations,” says Mr Wille of the Rainforest Alliance, which certifies producers of all kinds.

Guaranteeing a minimum price also means there is no incentive to improve quality, grumble coffee-drinkers, who find that the quality of Fairtrade brews varies widely. Again, the Rainforest Alliance does things differently. It does not guarantee a minimum price or offer a premium but provides training, advice and better access to credit. That consumers are often willing to pay more for a product with the RA logo on it is an added bonus, not the result of a formal subsidy scheme; such products must still fend for themselves in the marketplace. “We want farmers to have control of their own destinies, to learn to market their products in these competitive globalised markets, so they are not dependent on some NGO,” says Mr Wille.

But perhaps the most cogent objection to Fairtrade is that it is an inefficient way to get money to poor producers. Retailers add their own enormous mark-ups to Fairtrade products and mislead consumers into thinking that all of the premium they are paying is passed on. Mr Harford calculates that only 10% of the premium paid for Fairtrade coffee in a coffee bar trickles down to the producer. Fairtrade coffee, like the organic produce sold in supermarkets, is used by retailers as a means of identifying price-insensitive consumers who will pay more, he says.

As with organic food, the Fairtrade movement is under attack both from outsiders who think it is misguided and from insiders who think it has sold its soul. In particular, the launch by Nestlé, a food giant, of Partners’ Blend, a Fairtrade coffee, has convinced activists that the Fairtrade movement is caving in to big business. Nestlé sells over 8,000 non-Fairtrade products and is accused of exploiting the Fairtrade brand to gain favourable publicity while continuing to do business as usual. Mr Bretman disagrees. “We felt it would not be responsible to turn down an opportunity to do something that would practically help hundreds or thousands of farmers,” he says. “You are winning the battle if you get corporate acceptance that these ideas are important.” He concedes that the Fairtrade movement’s supporters are “a very broad church” which includes anti-globalisation and anti-corporate types. But they can simply avoid Nestlé’s Fairtrade coffee and buy from smaller Fairtrade producers instead, he suggests.

Besides, this is how change usually comes about, notes Mr Pollan. The mainstream co-opts the fringe and shifts its position in the process; “but then you need people to stake out the fringe again.” That is what has happened with organic food in America, and is starting to happen with Fairtrade food too. “People are looking for ▶▶

the next frontier," says Mr Pollan, and it already seems clear what that is: local food.

"Local is the new organic" has become the unofficial slogan of the local-food movement in the past couple of years. The rise of "Big Organic", the large-scale production of organic food to meet growing demand, has produced a backlash and claims that the organic movement has sold its soul. Purists worry that the organic movement's original ideals have been forgotten as large companies that produce and sell organic food on an industrial scale have muscled in.

This partly explains why food bought from local producers either directly or at farmers' markets is growing in popularity, and why local-food advocates are now the keepers of the flame of the food-activism movement. Local food need not be organic, but buying direct from small farmers short-circuits industrial production and distribution systems in the same way that buying organic used to. As a result, local food appears to be immune to being industrialised or corporatised. Organic food used to offer people a way to make a "corporate protest", says Mr Pollan, and now "local offers an alternative to that."

Think globally, act locally?

Buying direct means producers get a fair price, with no middlemen adding big margins along the distribution chain. Nor has local food been shipped in from the other side of the country or the other side of the world, so the smaller number of "food miles" makes local food greener, too. Local food thus appeals in different ways to environmentalists, national farm lobbies and anti-corporate activists, as well as consumers who want to know more about where their food comes from.

Obviously it makes sense to choose a product that has been grown locally over an identical product shipped in from afar. But such direct comparisons are rare. And it turns out that the apparently straightforward approach of minimising the "food miles" associated with your weekly groceries does not, in fact, always result in the smallest possible environmental impact.

The term "food mile" is itself misleading, as a report published by DEFRA, Britain's environment and farming ministry, pointed out last year. A mile travelled by a large truck full of groceries is not the same as a mile travelled by a sport-utility vehicle carrying a bag of salad. Instead, says Paul Watkiss, one of the authors of the DEFRA report, it is more helpful to think about food-vehicle miles (ie, the number of miles travelled by vehicles carrying food) and food-tonne miles (which take the tonnage being carried into account).

The DEFRA report, which analysed the supply of food in Britain, contained several counterintuitive findings. It turns out to be better for the environment to truck in

tomatoes from Spain during the winter, for example, than to grow them in heated greenhouses in Britain. And it transpires that half the food-vehicle miles associated with British food are travelled by cars driving to and from the shops. Each trip is short, but there are millions of them every day. Another surprising finding was that a shift towards a local food system, and away from a supermarket-based food system, with its central distribution depots, lean supply chains and big, full trucks, might actually increase the number of food-vehicle miles being travelled locally, because things would move around in a larger number of smaller, less efficiently packed vehicles.

Research carried out at Lincoln University in New Zealand found that producing dairy products, lamb, apples and onions in that country and shipping them to Britain used less energy overall than producing them in Britain. (Farming and processing in New Zealand is much less energy intensive.) And even if flying food in from the developing world produces more emissions, that needs to be weighed against the boost to trade and development.

There is a strand of protectionism and anti-globalisation in much local-food advocacy, says Gareth Edwards-Jones of the University of Wales. Local food lets farming lobbies campaign against imports under the guise of environmentalism. A common argument is that local food is fresher, but that is not always true: green beans, for

example, are picked and flown to Britain from Kenya overnight, he says. People clearly want to think that they are making environmentally or socially optimal food choices, he says, but "we don't have enough evidence" to do so.

What should a shopper do? All food choices involve trade-offs. Even if organic farming does consume a little less energy and produce a little less pollution, that must be offset against lower yields and greater land use. Fairtrade food may help some poor farmers, but may also harm others; and even if local food reduces transport emissions, it also reduces potential for economic development. Buying all three types of food can be seen as an anti-corporate protest, yet big companies already sell organic and Fairtrade food, and local sourcing coupled with supermarkets' efficient logistics may yet prove to be the greenest way to move food around.

Food is central to the debates on the environment, development, trade and globalisation—but the potential for food choices to change the world should not be overestimated. The idea of saving the world by shopping is appealing; but tackling climate change, boosting development and reforming the global trade system will require difficult political choices. "We have to vote with our votes as well as our food dollars," says Mr Pollan. Conventional political activity may not be as enjoyable as shopping, but it is far more likely to make a difference. ■



The drive for green bananas