

Relocalizing America's Foodⁱ

John Ikerdⁱⁱ

Local has replaced organic as the most dynamic sector of the retail food market. Sales of local foods grew from \$4 billion in 2002 to \$5 billion in 2007 and are projected to reach \$11 billion by 2011.¹ Organic food sales are still larger, approaching \$20 billion, but the rate of growth in organic foods sales seem to be slowing while sales of local foods are accelerating. For many people, *local* has become the new *organic*. In fact, the word “locavore” was chosen by the New Oxford American Dictionary as their 2007 “word of the year.” The term was first associated with the “100-mile diet,” but is described more generally as someone who shows a strong preference for foods that are locally grown, seasonally available, and produced without unnecessary additives or preservatives.²

Local foods are typically associated with farmers markets and community supported agricultural organizations or CSAs. USDA statistics indicate the number of farmers markets in the United States has increased from 1,755 to 4,385 between 1994 and 1996, increasing two and a half times in just over a decade. Current unofficial estimates of numbers of CSAs range from 1500 to 2000 nationwide compared with less than 100 in 1990. However, the local foods movement is probably most accurately defined by a growing commitment of discriminating restaurants and natural food stores to sourcing as much food as possibly from local growers.

The local food movement is about far more than a search for freshness and flavor. The Chefs Collaborative, a network of more than 1,000 American chefs, promotes the “joys of local, seasonal, and artisanal cooking,” proclaiming that “cultural and biological diversity are essential for the health of the earth and its inhabitants. Preserving and revitalizing sustainable food, fishing, and agricultural traditions strengthen that diversity.”³ These same cultural and ethical values are reflected in the Slow Food movement, a worldwide organization with more than 80,000 members, that is committed to “building food communities.” Their website states, “We believe that the food we eat should taste good; that it should be produced in a clean way that does not harm the environment, animal welfare or our health; that food producers should receive fair compensation for their work, and that all people should have access to good and clean food.”⁴ *Good, clean, and fair* are becoming the watchwords of the local foods movement.

To the skeptics, however, local foods are just a passing fad. To them, local food, like organic food, is an elitist market niche. They believe only a relatively small number of affluent consumers are willing and able to pay the higher costs of organic or locally grow foods. The skeptics point to the fact that organics still account to less than 4% of total food sales, even after more than a decade of popularity.⁵ In addition, they claim that organic production cannot

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ⁱⁱ John Ikerd is Professor Emeritus, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO – USA; Author of, *Sustainable Capitalism*, <http://www.kpbooks.com>, *A Return to Common Sense*, <http://www.rtedwards.com/books/171/>, *Small Farms are Real Farms*, Acres USA, <http://www.acresusa.com/other/contact.htm>, and *Crisis and Opportunity: Sustainability in American Agriculture*, University of Nebraska Press <http://nebraskapress.unl.edu>; Email: JEIkerd@centurytel.net; Website: <http://web.missouri.edu/~ikerdj/>.

possibly meet the basic food needs of humanity, even if consumers were willing to pay the higher costs. One prominent skeptic claims that a transition to organic production would lead to massive destruction of wildlife habitat and starvation of about half of the current world population.⁶ A more immediate constraint to the relocalization of food is the lack of an efficient system for marketing, assembling, and distributing foods within local communities. Mainstream food retailers are treating organic and local foods as passing opportunities to turn a quick profit.

The skeptics fail to recognize that the growing popularity of local foods is but the latest phase in a long-term trend that is fundamentally transforming the American food system. The organic and local food movements are simply continuations of the *natural* foods movement begun with the “back to the earth” movement of the 1960s. The “hippies” of the ‘60s produced their own food, started local farmers markets, and formed the first cooperative food buying clubs and natural food stores. They grew their foods organically because they were concerned about the health and environmental risks associated with the synthetic fertilizers and pesticides used by industrial agriculture. However, a deeper philosophy of organic farming was embodied in their communities – in their organic way of life. The natural food movement spread far beyond the “hippie” communities during the 1970s and 1980s, as more people became aware of potential health, environmental, and social problems associated with industrial foods.

The natural food movement laid the foundation for the booming organic food market of the 1990s, during which organic food sales doubled every three to four years. *Organic* certification simply gave an official definition to what had been *natural* foods. Most of the early growth in organic foods was for vegetables, fruits, grains, and soy products, reflecting continuing environmental and health concerns linked to use of agricultural chemicals. Animal products, led by organic milk, began to break into organic markets in the late 1980s. Widespread use of antibiotics and growth hormones in industrial livestock operations were the major concerns for consumers of meat, milk, and cheese. The inhumane treatment of animals in large-scale confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs) helped fuel demand for free range, pasture based, and naturally raised meat and dairy products. Concerns for the exploitation of family farmers and those who work on farms and in the food industry also grew as the agricultural operations became larger and more geographically concentrated.

Several recent books document a growing list of important ecological, social, and economic concerns that are driving the organic and local food movements. Best-selling books, particularly *Fast Food Nation*⁷ and *Omnivore’s Dilemma*,⁸ have awakened mainstream society to the dramatic changes in the ways their foods have been produced, processed, distributed, and marketed over the past few decades. These books vividly portray a food system that has not only compromised food quality and safety but also has helped homogenize the landscape, widen the chasm between rich and poor, fuel an epidemic of obesity, and promote American cultural imperialism around the world. These best-sellers sparked the interests of other investigative authors, resulting in books such as *The End of Food*⁹ and *America’s Food*¹⁰ which covers virtually all aspects of today’s food system. These books are filled with statistics and facts and are extensively referenced. They all tell the same basic story. The natural-organic-local food movement is about demanding fundamental changes in the American food system.

As we look to the future, still greater challenges confront the current food system. Declining availability of fossil energy, mounting evidence of global climate change, and growing social and economic inequity are raising additional concerns. The concept of “peak oil” refers to the fact that once a new oil field is discovered, it takes about 30 to 40 years to bring it into peak production.¹¹ At that point, about half of the total quantity of recoverable oil remains in the ground, but that remaining half is more difficult and costly to retrieve. Equally important, production inevitably declines after peak production has been reached. U.S. oil discoveries peaked in the late 1930s and 1940s, with major discoveries in Oklahoma and Texas. U.S. oil production peaked in 1971 and has been declining ever since. The peak in *global* oil discoveries occurred in 1962, indicating a peak in global production sometime in the early 2000s, with estimates ranging from 2005 to 2025. Even the major oil companies, such as BP, Exxon-Mobil, and Chevron-Exaco, have begun to focus on alternative energy sources for their future.

Kelly Cain of the University of Wisconsin-River Falls refers to “peak oil” and global climate change as the “evil twins.” The buildup of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere is a direct consequence of the release of stored energy from fossil fuels. Fossil energy is stored in the bonds that connect molecules of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and other elements from the air with nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium and other elements from the soil in forming the tissues of living plants. When the energy is released, these bonds are broken and the various chemical elements, including carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses, are released into the environment. This problem is intrinsic for all fossil energy sources and particularly for coal. We cannot replace declining supplies of petroleum by relying on any other fossil energy sources without exacerbating the risks of global climate change. There may not yet be a scientific consensus regarding peak oil and global climate change but the predominance of scientific evidence validates the legitimacy of growing public concerns.

Growing economic and social inequities have received less public attention but are no lesser treats to the long run sustainability of society. The disparity in incomes between the wealthy and the rest of us in the United States has reached unprecedented levels. The poorest *one-half* of Americans currently lives on only one-eighth of total U.S. income while the top *five percent* takes in more than one-fifth. In the words of Alan Greenspan, former Federal Reserve Chairman, “The income gap between the rich and the rest of the U.S. population has become so wide, and is growing so fast, that it might eventually threaten the stability of democratic capitalism itself.”¹² A similarly growing gap between the rich and poor nations of the world is an even greater threat to global stability and sustainability.

Our current food system is a major contributor to all these problems. For example, today’s industrial food system accounts for about 17% of all fossil energy used in the United States and requires more than 10 kcals of fossil energy for each kcal of food energy it produces.¹³ U.S. agriculture accounts for an estimated 22.5% of all greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S., with livestock production contributing more than 80% of that total.¹⁴ Farm laborers and food industry workers are among the lowest paid workers in the U.S. and most receive few if any additional benefits, leaving many without health care. Agricultural workers are at the center of the current controversy concerning legal and illegal immigration of low paid workers. In addition, the poor suffer from more diet related illnesses, including obesity, diabetes, and heart disease – obvious reflections of a nation that is simultaneously overfed and undernourished. Recent scientific

studies documenting the nutrient deficiency of industrial foods may provide a logical explanation for this apparent paradox.¹⁵

Agriculture's contribution to growing economic disparity is highlighted by the recent diversion of about one-third of the U.S. corn crop from producing food for people to fuel for automobiles. Industrial agriculture is motivated by the economic bottom line rather than by a social responsibility to produce *good, clean, and fair* food for all. When it's more profitable to produce fuel for the wealthy rather than food for the hungry, industrial agriculture will produce fuel – and lobby for government subsidies to do so. The poor cannot reflect their food needs in the marketplace and have little influence on government policy. Their influence is limited to their inherently unequal ability to produce things of economic value, leaving them with too little income to buy enough good food.

Ultimately the issues of food quality, peak oil, global warming, and economic inequity are all issues of *food security*. No individual, community, or nation that depends solely on the economic marketplace for their basic food needs can ever be food secure. The markets will produce foods that are most profitable, not necessarily foods that are the safest or highest in quality. In addition, the markets cannot and will not ensure *long run* food security, because economic value in individualistic in nature, and thus places a large premium on the present relative to the future. Economic value must be expected to accrue at least during the lifetime of the individual decision maker, and the closer in time, the higher in value. Those of future generations cannot express their food needs and preferences in today's marketplace. The local food movement today is being driven by growing concerns about the inherent lack of *sustainability* of the industrial food system – its inability to meet the real food needs of the present without compromising the food opportunities for those of the future. These concerns are logical and well grounded in reason.

The fundamental question confronting society today is whether an alternative food system can be developed that will address these ecological and social concerns. The answer is a resounding, yes! Thousands of farmers all across America and around the world are already showing the way. They may label themselves organic, biodynamic, ecological, natural, holistic, practical, innovative, or nothing at all; but they are all pursuing the same basic purpose. They are creating an agriculture that is capable of meeting the real needs of the present while leaving equal or better opportunities for the future. They are creating a sustainable agriculture.

A number of studies have indicated that farmers pursuing various organic and sustainable farming strategies are able to reduce their fossil energy use by 30% to 60%.^{16,17} A shift from industrial to organic farming – restoring the organic matter to levels needed for healthy, productive organic soils – could more than offset the current net emissions of CO₂ by U.S. agriculture, according to a recent study by the Rodale Institute.¹⁸ When beef animals are finished on pastures rather than finished in feed lots, kcal of protein can be produced using less than one-third as much fossil energy.¹⁹ Furthermore, CO₂ emissions from beef production could be cut by 80% by shifting from grain-fed to grass-fed beef, on pastures rather than CAFOs, according to Animal science professor, David Tisch.²⁰ Grass-fed and pasture-based production of meat, milk, and eggs are some of the most common and most profitable examples of sustainable agriculture. Farmers are proving that organic, local and other approaches to sustainable agriculture can produce high-quality food while addressing the ecological challenges of the twenty-first century.

The questions of social and economic equity are at the very heart of sustainable agriculture. Industrialization transforms farms into factories, fields and feed lots in biological assembly lines, and farmers into little more than low-skilled, low-paid assembly line workers. With industrial agriculture, particularly contract agriculture, someone other than the farmer does most of the thinking. Corporate agribusinesses, not farmers, developed the seeds, fertilizers and pesticides for industrial farming; developed the breeds, feeds, and confinement facilities of industrial animal agriculture. In many cases, someone other than the farmers make the important decisions concerning planting, harvesting, breeding, feeding, medicating, and marketing. As a result, someone other than the farmers quite logically realize the profits. In sustainable agriculture, the farmer does the thinking and the farmer has the opportunity to reap the rewards.

Sustainable farmers work with nature, rather than attempt to conquer nature. They fit the farm to their land and climate rather than try to force nature to fit the way they might prefer to farm. Their farming operations tend to be more diverse and complex because nature is diverse and complex. Diversity may be expressed through a variety of crop and animal enterprises, crop rotations and cover crops, or in multi-species livestock grazing systems. By managing diversity, these new farmers are able to reduce their dependence on the pesticides, fertilizers, and other commercial inputs that threaten the environment and squeeze farmers' profits. Working with nature requires knowledge and understanding of nature – it requires thinking – but it yields both ecological and economic rewards.

Sustainable farmers build relationships rather than exploit short run market opportunities. They have a sense of personal connectedness with their customers and realize that each person values things differently because each has different needs and preferences. They must have a deep sense of respect for people and an understanding of the needs and preferences of their particular customers in order to produce the things that their customers value most. They market to likeminded people who care where their food comes from and how it is produced – locally grown, organic, natural, humanely raised, hormone and antibiotic free – and, they receive premium prices for their products. Relationship marketing requires a knowledge and understanding of people – it requires thinking – but it yields both social and economic rewards.

Sustainable agriculture is a knowledge-based approach to resource management. Peter Drucker, a time-honored consultant to twentieth-century industry, writes of a post-industrial, knowledge-based society in his book, *Post-Capitalist Society*. "In the knowledge society into which we are moving, individuals are central," he writes. "Knowledge is not impersonal, like money. Knowledge does not reside in a book, a databank, a software program; they contain only information. Knowledge is always embodied in a person, carried by a person; created, augmented, or improved by a person; applied by a person; taught by a person, and passed on by a person. The shift to the knowledge society therefore puts the person in the center."²¹ Industrial agriculture is centered on capital and technology; sustainable agriculture is centered on people. Industrial agriculture is of the past; sustainable farming is the future.

So what about the claims of the critics? Is the market for sustainably produced food just an elitist market niche? Could organic production meet the basic food needs of humanity, even if

consumers were willing to pay the higher economic costs? Can an efficient system for marketing, assembling, and distributing be developed to allow the relocation of food?

First, the sustainable food market is not just an elitist market. Reputable surveys of the natural foods market indicate that at least one-fourth, and perhaps even one-third, of Americans today are looking for something fundamentally different than what they are finding in the mainstream supermarkets and franchise restaurants today.²² Studies of broader cultural trends indicate that the sustainable food movement is but one aspect of a new American culture that emerged from the environmental and civil rights movements of the 1960s and now makes up about one-third of all Americans.²³ This new food culture still constitutes a minority of all U.S. consumers, but is growing rapidly in response to growing environmental and social concerns. The new American food culture is already at least five times as large as current sales of natural, organic, local, and other sustainably produced foods. The primary limiting factor in expanding the organic food market today is not the market but a lack of organic producers.

Sustainable agriculture is committed to the principles of good, clean, fair food for all; it is not an elitist movement. Admittedly, it's easier for the more affluent to gain affordable access to good, clean food because it costs more to produce food sustainably. However, a significant portion of food costs today are being "externalized," by imposing them on consumers, food industry workers, and on future generations by exposing them to exploitation and environmental degradation. That said; Americans on average spend less than 10% of their income for food; so the average American can certainly afford to pay the full costs of sustainably produced foods. Low income consumers can also afford to eat good, clean food, but they can't afford all of the conveniences built into today's highly processed, packaged, pre-prepared foods. Less than 20% of "food costs" in America today represents costs of the actual food. The sustainable agriculture movement is committed to making good, clean affordable to all people.²⁴ Part of that commitment must be to help low-income households learn the value of buying minimally processed food locally, and finding the time and energy to prepare really good food at home.²⁵

With regard to providing good, clean food for those in the lower-income nations of the world, the only hope is through a sustainable agriculture – an agriculture that empowers people to achieve food security within their own communities, locally. An industrial, global agriculture will provide food for those who are able to pay the highest, most profitable prices, not those in greatest need. The "green revolution" is failing the hungry people of the world because it relies on global economic forces, not local empowerment. The best hope for the hungry people of the world is a new food culture that is committed to providing good, clean, fair food for all people.

Second, regarding the question of whether organic farming systems are capable feeding a growing world population, research around the world has shown that organic farms can yield as much or more per acre than industrial agriculture.^{26,27} Organic and other sustainable farming systems simply requires more thinking, caring people -- people who understand how to work with nature, rather than try to conquer nature, and who care enough about their neighbors, customers, and those of future generations to take good care of their land. Industrial agriculture was designed to allow fewer farmers to produce more food by exploiting the resources of nature and society. This strategy made sense in a world with seemingly limitless natural and human resources. However, the growing ecological and social concerns are clear indications that

industrial development, including industrial agriculture, is simply not sustainable. Thus, an industrial agriculture is fundamentally incapable of providing food security for a growing global population.

Over time, as natural and human resources become more limited and thus more costly, the economic costs of industrial agriculture will rise and the relative costs of sustainable agriculture will fall. More people will return to the land, because sustainable farming will be an occupation that is highly valued by society and will require a high level of knowledge and ability to think, thus justifying that value. Sustainable agriculture today is still in its early stages of development. With more experience and more research devoted to understanding how to work in harmony with nature and society, to replacing fossil energy with renewable solar energy, productivity will rise and costs will fall. There is a finite limit to how many people the earth can sustain with solar energy, but that limit is far larger than can be supported with the dwindling stocks of fossil energy that support industrial agriculture. Sustainability agriculture is necessary – not optional.

Finally, a new kind of food system is already emerging that will make the relocation of food not only possible but practical and affordable. Farmers markets and CSAs will continue to be important alternatives, but most local foods in the future will go through “higher volume” markets. One of the pioneers in developing such markets is New Seasons Market in Portland, Oregon, which currently operates nine stores and has plans to open two more in 2009.²⁸ New Seasons’ stores look pretty much like other modern supermarkets, with delis, bakeries, and other amenities American food shoppers have come to expect. Their stores are typically located in areas bordering lower and higher income neighborhoods, drawing their loyal customers from both, and helping to strengthen both communities. They offer both organic and conventional foods in their store and virtually every item in the store is labeled with respect to not just the country but the “farm of origin.” They promote local-grown products and have long-term commitments with hundreds of local and regional farmers which ensure that everyone shares in their success.

Another local foods pioneer is Good Natured Family Farms, a cooperative of thirty-plus farmers in southeastern Kansas and southwestern Missouri.²⁹ They have teamed up with Hen House Markets, a 13-store supermarket chain operated by Ball Foods Inc., a family corporation with a long history and strong commitment to the Kansas City community. The cooperative owns and manages their own Good Natured brand, which now includes an expanding line of branded food products, including beef, chicken, eggs, milk, and sausages. The cooperative also serves as marketing liaison for other local producers. The Good Natured-Hen House “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” campaign has grown in retail sales of local products by 35% per year over the past several years, with sales topping \$10 million in 2007. Some of their local products are organic, but customers rely most on the integrity of local producers.

However, the model for the sustainable, local food system of the future may resemble more closely organizations that are called multi-farm CSAs or local food buying clubs, depending on whether farmers or consumers take the organizational initiative. *Grown Locally*,³⁰ *Idaho’s Bounty*,³¹ and *the Oklahoma Food Cooperative*,³² provide some insights into the future potential for sustainable, local food systems. Most offer a variety of vegetables, fruits, meats, eggs, cheese, baked goods, flowers, soaps, and herbs. Many items are available as CSA shares,

standing orders, or for week-by-week purchases. Customers may have the option of on-farm pick-up, local delivery points, or delivery to the door for an added charge. Different products and different delivery schedules are provided for different seasons. Organizational websites allow producers to post what they have available each week, ensuring that products sold are available for delivery, and allowing customers to place or revise their orders on the website.

In the not too distant future, virtually everyone in the United States will have access to the internet. Community-based food associations could establish local assembly and distribution systems to pick up products at local farms and assemble customer orders. Existing retail delivery system networks, such as UPS and Fed-Ex, are already making deliveries into most neighborhoods on a daily basis and will become even more frequent as internet sales for all products increase in the future. The local food association could help establish and maintain personal connections between farmers and their customers through local food events, scheduled farm visits, and “dinners at the farm.”³³ Healthy farms, healthy foods, healthy communities.

Fifty years ago, most food in America was locally grown. Construction on the interstate highway system had just begun and supermarkets and franchise restaurants were just beginning to catch on. By the 1960s, however, supermarket chains had replaced the local “mom and pop” grocers, by the 1970s, fast food franchises were “freeing housewives from their kitchens” and by the 1990s, industrial agribusinesses had replaced family farms as the nation's major food producers. In the 2000s, the American food system is being transformed from national to global. But, cheap fossil energy made all of this possible, and the days of cheap fossil energy are over. In addition, the negative ecological and social consequences of corporate industrialization can no longer be ignored or even long endured.

In an ever-changing world, it seems logical to assume that changes in the food system over the next fifty years will be at least as great as in the past fifty years. With growing threats to ecological, social, and economic sustainability, including national and global food security, it is obvious that future changes must be in a direction fundamentally different from that of continuing industrialization. The natural, organic, local, sustainable food movement is at least as advanced today as the industrial food movement was fifty years ago. There is no logical reason to expect anything other than the relocation of America's food. There is quite simply no logical alternative.

End Notes

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- ³¹ Visit the *Idaho's Bounty* website at <http://www.idahosbounty.org/>
- ³² Visit the *Oklahoma Food Cooperative* website at <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/>
- ³³ See “Dinners” at <http://www.plateandpitchfork.com/>