Gabrielle Frostbutter

Mrs. Sullivan

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Localize

Since the end of World War II, nearly every piece of our food system has been consolidated into big businesses in an effort to end food insecurity. Vital local organizations that once fed and supported communities were dismantled. Because of this, environmentalists in the nineteen-seventies began what is now called the local food movement. The local food movement not only creates a relationship with the source of our food but benefits our health, our economy, and the environment.

What is the local food movement? While many people define it differently, River Lin hit the nail on the head when she described it as “…people all across the nation promoting the value and benefits of consuming locally grown food.” (Lin, River. "The Local Food Movement”). The term “Locavore” crystalized this movement in 2007 when it was chosen as Oxford Dictionary’s Word of the Year. Locavore can be defined as one who bases their diet on foods grown or produced in the region in which they live. A local diet certainly isn’t a new concept, but it has been promoted lately by the media. Forty years ago only hippies and environmentalists were a part of this movement. Now, people of different backgrounds and social standing have begun to promote the local food movement. It began as a reaction to the shift in the federal farm policy (1970’s) where Nixon managed to drop food prices at the expense of local farmers. Federal funding shifted from supporting all farmers to only a few commodity crops such as corn and soy. This caused many farmers to go bankrupt and sell their properties which were bought out by big business, marking the beginning of a depletion of healthy foods. Our markets then became more focused on cost effective ways of producing food rather than concentrating on the health and well-being of consumers. This is why we need food security, to protect our own health.

But why do we need this? It’s hard for many people in America to understand how huge of a problem food insecurity is. That’s because many of us don’t live in food deserts. A “food desert” is an area where citizens don’t have access to reasonably priced foods that create a healthy diet. Chicago’s Altgeld, for illustration, is one of the oldest public housing projects in America. It has a population of roughly 2,500 residents, but aside from a liquor store on sight, there’s no nearby food sources. The diet these people are forced to have due to their environment leaves them at risk for diabetes, obesity, and chronic illness. In 2008 1.4 billion adults in the world were overweight, 842 million people were undernourished, and 98% of these people live outside of high-income countries. ([FAO] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). Chef Tom Colicchio explained why this is happening when he said that “obesity is a symptom of poverty” ("Q & A: Tom Colicchio Talks Childhood Hunger." CNN News). The healthier foods are more expensive leaving low income families no choice but to eat sugars, fats, and empty calories. This isn’t only a problem at home but in school lunches as well. Childhood obesity rates have skyrocketed since the implication of mass production. Ironically, these problems began with the original concept of food security. Once it was a way to keep people from going hungry, but did not help their health, farmers, or the environment. The only concern was making food cheap. Because of this, the writers of “LOCAL: The New Face of Food and Farming in America” took it upon themselves to redefine food security to benefit everyone. The new definition is meant to protect from starvation, benefit health, and prevent the destruction of the earth. . “Food Security is having consistent year round access to safe, local, affordable and culturally appropriate food that is grown, raised, produced and moved about in manners that are responsible to the environment while reflecting a consumption of natural resources that is equitable with a view to our offspring seven generations from now.” (Gayeton, Douglas. Local)

While fruits, vegetables, and whole food sold at chain stores could be healthy and may be cheaper than locally grown produce they’re still not as nutritious as they could be. When mass production and transportation was non-existent or minimal people had no choice but to eat in season. Then along came transport that allowed foods to be distributed over long distances in a fairly short time. Though just how fresh can food really be if it has spent days sitting in trucks before reaching a supermarket? Being aware of the distance our food travels makes a huge impact on our satisfaction of it and on our awareness of health. Imagine that same fresh-picked tomato straight from a local farm or your home garden. It’s much more nutrition and satisfying. With all foods available 365 days per year, we have lost our connection with the seasons. Eating food when it is in season is far better for us – the quality is higher and the price is lower, due to its relative abundance. When we purchase tomatoes from the store, on the other hand, we don’t realize they’ve been picked while still green, shipped hundreds or thousands of miles and matured in transit. Not to mention the direct correlation between pollution used to produce and transport and the world’s health. One study found that 250,000 tons of global warming gases were released and that nearly 950 cases of asthma, 16,870 missed school days, 43 hospital admissions, and 37 deaths occurred because of a decrease in air quality related to the transport of foods ("Food Miles." NRDC).

As a result of how complicated and big our food production is there are a lot of hidden costs when it comes to mass production and buying foods from big businesses. These costs could be health related if you think about the medical bills one might need to pay because of the toll innutritious foods and the pollution involved in transport take on our bodies but it is economic as well. A local food system provides a way for consumers to give back to their economy, support their community, and have more control over what they’re paying in the long run. Several studies have shown that money spent in local businesses are reinvested back into local economies (Mitchell, Stacy. "Key Studies: Why Local Matters.”). When buying local a significant amount more of your money goes to purchases at other local businesses, farmers, and service providers. This provides a stronger economic base for your community. These same studies proved that locally-owned businesses generate a premium in enhanced economic impact to the community and our tax base. This assures that you’re putting your taxes to good use. Local businesses in town centers call for moderately little infrastructure investment and make more efficient use of public services as compared to nationwide owned stores entering the community. The Andersonville study even found that if every family in the country spent just $10 a month at locally-owned, independent businesses instead of national chains, over $9.3 billion would be directly returned to local economies (Shepard, Ellen, Matt Cunningham, and Dan Houston. "The Andersonville Study of Retail Economics."). Imagine the good use that money could be put to. It could give communities better schools, better roads, more funding for police, fire and rescue departments, more community activities for youths, and resilient local economies.

In conclusion, the more informed people are on the benefits of a local diet the more sustainable and healthy we all can live. As importing food from different regions becomes more and more conventional it’s important to think about where one’s food is coming from and how it effects every part of our lives, from our health to our economy to the environment we’re leaving for future generations.

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