



Centre for
Alternative
Technology

REDUCING THE IMPACT OF EATING

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The impact of food

Food makes the largest single contribution to our ecological footprint. Nowadays most of our food travels long distances before it reaches our plates. Perishable food is increasingly transported by plane, and even food grown in the UK may travel from the farm to a processor, to a wholesaler, then to a central distributor before coming back to the local supermarket. A huge amount of energy goes into the packaging and processing of food and the production of pesticides and fertilisers, and a large volume of waste is created by packaging.

'Food miles'

The distance food travels from where it is produced to where it is eaten - 'from plough to plate' - is often a large part of the environmental impact of food production. The Women's Environmental Network (WEN) estimates that a quarter of the UK's carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions come from transporting food from growers, via processors and distributors, to shops and into our homes. Imports account for 95% of fruit and half of all vegetables consumed in the UK. The average distance we drive to shop for food is also increasing each year.

One study found that a local apple from a village shop travelled 38 miles before reaching a plate, a British apple bought from a supermarket travelled 223 miles and a New Zealand apple bought in a British supermarket travelled 11,326 miles.

Processing and Packaging

The WEN estimate that processed food requires around 15 times more energy to produce than raw, unprocessed food. Highly processed and packaged 'convenience' foods also contribute to food miles, as each ingredient is transported to various parts of the country for processing and preparation before eventually ending up on your plate. A 'ready' meal will have travelled many more miles than an identical meal prepared at home.

Food packaging accounts for about a third of all household waste in the UK. The WI (Women's Institute) has estimated that we spend up to £15 billion on food packaging every year.

Pesticides and fertilisers

The production of non-organic food requires more energy, due to the use of artificial fertilisers and

pesticides. There is also the health risk of pesticide exposure for producers and consumers.

What you can do

Buy locally grown and processed produce whenever you can, from a shop that is as near as possible to your home. This reduces the fossil fuel emissions associated with transporting food. Fresh food is also healthier as it has a higher nutritional value and is less likely to have the extra chemicals used to preserve food during storage and transit. Big Barn has a directory of local food producers within the UK, at www.bigbarn.co.uk

Avoid buying exotic or non-seasonal produce, especially airfreighted food such as mange tout, grapes and mangoes.

Visit a local Farmers' Market, where local producers sell their own produce. This reduces food miles and the need for packaging, and encourages organic farming. Country Markets also bring home-made, fresh food to the local community, and the money goes directly back to the producer. There are currently over 500 such markets in the UK, held usually once a week.

Join a vegetable (or fruit) box scheme. This is a box containing freshly picked, organic, usually locally grown produce delivered weekly to your door or to a local drop off point. Box scheme operators usually offer small, medium and family size boxes. The vegetables in the box will vary from week to week depending on the season. The Soil Association has details of UK veg box schemes and the web site library has sections on 'How to set up a vegetable Box Scheme'.

Grow some of your own organic food. If you only have a small garden or no garden try growing herbs and salads, perhaps in a window box (see our *Urban Gardening* tipsheet).

Join a Local Exchange Trading Scheme (LETS). These allow the exchange of goods and services locally without the use of money. LETS help rebuild the local economy, put people in control of local resources and encourage community-based businesses. For a list of local area groups see the LetsLink UK web site (see overleaf).

Set up a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) scheme. The principle is that the customer pays in advance for a share of a particular farmer or group

of farmer's produce. A farmer draws up their plans for the year and customers sign up to purchase a share of the yield. It brings the customer one step nearer the grower than even farmers' markets and ensures that the farmers know at the beginning of the planting season that they have a guaranteed market for their produce. The system originated in Japan and is well established in the USA - in the UK it is still in its infancy, but is beginning to grow. For more information see the Soil Association's web site library's pages on CSA and 'Subscription Farming'.

Wherever possible, walk, cycle or use public transport to get to the shops or farmers' market.

A WEN report called 'Sustainable Sustenance' offers shoppers tips on how to reduce food miles. It compares the journeys different foods make and the CO₂ emissions they cause, and answers the perennial question "which is best, organic, fairly traded, local or seasonal?"

You can download the report (270KB) from: www.wen.org.uk/local_food/reports/foodmiles.pdf

Fresh food

Eat more fresh food and enjoy preparing meals from raw ingredients. If unnecessary packaging frustrates you, try leaving it at the check-out! Avoid 'convenience' foods and pre-prepared highly processed and packaged meals.

Organic food

Buy organic produce, locally if possible. Organic farming severely restricts the use of artificial chemical fertilisers and pesticides, which pollute water courses and damage the soil. Organic farmers fertilise their fields by rotating their crops, using composted manure, and planting crops that naturally feed nitrogen to the soil. Animals are also reared without the routine use of drugs, antibiotics and wormers common in intensive livestock farming. Organic farming is better for the soil, wildlife and animal welfare. Locally produced organic produce is often cheaper than supermarket produce. The Soil Association's organic directory gives details of UK veg box schemes.

Meat

Eat less meat. Rising meat consumption is putting unsustainable pressure on the earth's land and water resources. Animals need much more water than grain to produce the same amount of food and land cleared for pasture or to grow crops to feed animals leads to deforestation. In Brazil around 12 million acres of forest have been cut down to grow soya beans for European animal fodder. Methane from cattle is also contributing to climate change.

It's also better to buy organic meat. Even locally bred non-organic livestock may have been fed on fodder grown abroad and shipped in, further contributing to food miles.

Fairtrade

There will always be some goods you can't source locally e.g. coffee and tea. If this is the case, try to buy initially from your own area, then country and if all else fails to buy fairly traded and organic goods. The Fairtrade mark guarantees a fair price and better working conditions for the producer.

Further Information

CAT publishes several books and tipsheets on organic gardening. See our publications leaflet or visit www.cat.org.uk/catpubs for details. Tipsheets are available from our pay per view web site: www.cat.org.uk/catpubs/ppv.tmpl

Contacts

Soil Association

Tel: 0117 314 5000; www.soilassociation.org
Information centre and organic directory on the web site, with details of UK veg box schemes.

Local Food Works www.localfoodworks.org

Web site set up to encourage local and organic food networks, to help shops, cafes, schools, hospitals, prisons, hotels and community centres.

Link Organic www.linksorganic.com

Directory of organic foods and produce.

National Association of Farmers' Markets

Tel: 0845 45 88 420; www.farmersmarkets.net

Country Markets Ltd

Tel: 0845 108 3784; www.country-markets.co.uk

Local Exchange Trading Systems (Letslink UK)

Tel: 0207 607 7852; www.letslinkuk.org

The Fairtrade Foundation

Tel: 020 7405 5942 www.fairtrade.org.uk

Women's Environmental Network (WEN)

Tel: 020 7481 9004; www.wen.org.uk/localfood

Slow Food

Tel: 0800 917 1232; www.slowfood.com

Network across 48 countries promoting 'slow food' - quality, local produce. Web site lists UK groups and events.

WWF - One Planet Living

www.wwf.org.uk/oneplanetliving

Site that includes details of WWF research into 'ecological footprinting', showing that food is the biggest single factor in the average UK footprint.