



Environmental Education Council Of Ohio

Green Paper

By

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Local Foods: An Important Initiative for EE

Local foods are the answer to many environmental and societal problems, from rebuilding decaying communities to caring for the land. Eating locally connects people to their food sources. People learn which farmers raise healthy foods and take care of the soil, and they make sure to buy from them because they trust them and want to support their practices. When people spend their food dollar locally, that same dollar stays in the community longer and enriches other local businesses. When they spend their food dollar to support farmers' healthy growing practices, they help the farmer to stay on the land and to care for it properly. They help to ensure that farming is profitable enough to keep farmland in farming and not have to sell it for development. We will examine each of these perspectives as they are addressed in the literature. Then we will see how they are being enacted in Ashland Ohio.

Rebuilding Communities

Many of today's communities are in disrepair. With a few exceptions, in most towns and cities, many of Main Street's businesses have closed. Big box stores have replaced the small grocer, the bakery, the shoe store, the clothing store. Residents often travel long distances to work. Tired at night, they hole up at home instead of sharing camaraderie and working on public concerns with others. Money from the big boxes leaves the community every night. Meanwhile more local businesses are struggling for customers.

Local foods are a way to start restoring community vitality. For example, individuals, restaurants, and food services can purchase directly from local farmers. The money taken in is then spent at the local hardware and feed stores, implement dealers, locally-owned grocery stores, bookstores, and office supply stores, and so on. In a presentation at Ashland University (2012), farmer David Kline told a story about the postmaster in his town who bragged about how worn out the money was, as it had changed hands multiple times within the town until it was worn out. Part of this local economy is stimulated by local foods. Kline has made a commitment to shop at a regional grocery store who buys from local farmers. He (2010, p. 50) states, "I refuse to let our grocery money be zapped to Arkansas the evening it's spent." He continues,

Studies have shown that a dollar spent locally may exchange hands seventeen times before leaving the community. And buying locally involves much more than food – there are hardware and houseware stores, shoe stores and feed mills, farm machinery dealers and repair shops. They need our support to succeed and we need them as suppliers in order to have a thriving agricultural community.

Kloppenborg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson (1996, p 119) have described a "foodshed," in which, instead of forcing farmers to sell to distant markets for little money, communities would work to increase businesses for local and regional food processing and distribution and thus, retain economic value and produce jobs.

Since economic concentration is the prime engine of distancing, secessionist and successionist alternatives ought to be built around small and midsized enterprises (dairies, cheese factories, smithies, greenhouses, canneries, restaurants, specialty markets) capable of responding affirmatively to the opportunities and responsibilities of the emerging commensal community.

They further state that people who live and work locally will become concerned about conservation and preservation of farmland: "In the foodshed, collective responsibility for stewardship of people and of the land becomes a necessity rather than an optional virtue." For example, Lappé and Lappé (2003) wrote about an after-school program in Berkeley. Although local farmers had been ripping out orchards because of cheap imports, the directors of the program made a commitment to buy locally-raised apples. In addition, they found that they were enriching local farmers by spending up to \$10,000 a month on local organic produce.

Ben Hewitt (2009, p. 217) records a trip that he made to a local restaurant in his town. He names the patrons and describes his conversations with some of them. He believes that his town's emerging food economy is "the only sane response to the fractured vulnerability" of the national food culture and that his town's "agrepneurial revolution" is its best gift to the world.

I looked around the room and I realized, not for the first time, but for the first time with such absolute, startling clarity, the incredible, indelible strength of this community and how much of that strength had been forged by food. Wealthy and poor; beef and tofu; Whole Foods in Boston and the Buffalo Mountain Food Co-op two doors down the street; young and old; land barons and tenants; currency of money and currency of community.

To Berry (1995, p. 21), a community economy is not a “killer economy,” in which each person aims to become wealthy at the expense of other business owners. It is an economy which ensures that hard work is rewarded and that people receive what their product is worth. It is more cooperative than competitive: “It is an economy whose aim is generosity and a well-distributed and safeguarded abundance.” This economy, in order to be sustainable, depends on urban customers too, people who are loyal to farmers whose growing practices they trust and who recognize that value by paying what the food (and other products) is worth.

Caring for the Land

Receiving the worth of the food they produce enables farmers to use growing practices that assure healthy food and conservation of the land. When we ask landowners to take care of their land, “we are obliged to make the landowner able to afford not only to use the land but also to care properly for it.” Berry, 1995, p. 52). That means landowners who take care of the land need to be paid for “their work, their products, and their stewardship (p. 55).” Berry (1995) challenges conservationists to make “common cause with small landowners and land users” (p. 56) because local economies are “the best and perhaps the only means we have of preserving that system of ecological and cultural connections that is, inescapably, our common wealth (p. 59).”

If conservationists merely eat whatever the supermarket provides and the government allows, they are giving economic support to all-out industrial food production: to the animal factories; to the depletion of soil, rivers and aquifers; to crop monocultures and the consequent losses of biological and genetic diversity; to the pollution, toxicity, and over-medication that are the inevitable accompaniments of all-our industrial food production; to a food system based on long-distance transportation and the consequent waste of petroleum and the spread of pests and diseases; larger fields receiving always less human affection and human care.

If, on the other hand, conservationists are willing to insist on having the best food, produced in the best way, as close to their homes as possible, and if they are willing to learn to judge the quality of food and food production, then they are going to give economic support to an entirely different kind of land use in an entirely different landscape (Berry, 2006, p. 6).

Although many people look for the least expensive food, Lappé and Lappé (2003) remind us that cheap food hides the real costs. We pay for our food, not just at the grocery store but in taxes going to the largest producers, the cost of pollution and soil loss, social services for the people who are squeezed out of farming, and urban crowding and sprawl. The alternative is to be willing to pay for health, of people, of animals, and of soil.

What is difficult to calculate, and challenging to measure is life. It may sound corny, but there is no other way to say it: the life of the farm family sustained by the love of the land. The life of the rural community centered around healthy farms. The life of animals living free from misery and disease. The life of the soil itself – the millions of microorganisms that live or die in every handful (p. 247).

An aspect of land care that is often overlooked is its beauty and its hospitality to wild plants and animals. A well-managed farm is both beautiful and peaceful, a joy to farmer and friends, as well as passers-by or the farm’s customers. A small farmer often has a woodlot, with varied species of trees, birds, and wildflowers, that he or she manages for wildlife, fuel, and other farm needs. A farm pond may supply habitat for fish, turtles, snakes, frogs, and insects such as dragonflies and damselflies. Wetlands that farmers are not forced to drain for farmland are filled with plants and animals. Meadows and pastures flourish with rabbits, foxes, field birds, butterflies and moths, blackberries, black raspberries, and fruit trees (Logsdon, 2000; Kline, 1997).

Connecting People to Their Food Sources

David Kline (2012), Amish farmer, stated that people should know their farmers and their farming practices. A good farmer will build healthy soil and be wary of using chemicals. Kline stated that babies today are born with 200 chemicals in their bodies that were not invented in 1900. Chris Norman (2012), Executive Director of Crown Point Ecology Center, run by the Sisters of St. Dominic, noted that there is a connection between eating chemicals in food and autism. A couple in Wisconsin, both RN’s, became concerned about the dramatic rise in asthma, ADD, cancer, depression, obesity, and fibromyalgia, as well as the stress on animals being raised for food and the wide-spread use of chemicals in farming. About the same time, their son developed a brain tumor. They quit their jobs to farm. They now raise cattle on pasture, the food they are designed to eat. They grow clover, alfalfa, and grasses and move the cows from pasture to pasture to manage the grazing. Their pastured beef contains more omega-3 fatty acids, Vitamin E, beta-carotene, and less saturated fat (Lappé and Lappé, 2003). Similarly, the milk from Kline’s organic dairy is yellow from the beta-carotene that his cows are getting from being pastured on grass. The cows are eating healthfully, producing healthy milk, which in turn makes people healthy (2012). In contrast, Kline’s daughter once bought yogurt as a starter to make yogurt, but it did not have any

healthful bacteria and did not work as a starter (Kline, 2010).

Brad Masi (2012) defined a foodshed as an about-100 mile radius of food production, processing, warehousing, distribution, and waste management. Decreasing distance from farm to consumer improves the chances that people can be connected to their food sources and be confident about how their food is grown. This connection can be enhanced in several ways. People can grow their own food. Also, farmers can market directly by means of farmers markets and coops that sell local produce directly to customers. Subscription farming or Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) creates a partnership between people who become members and the farmers. In the process, the people visit the farm regularly and sometimes engage in some of the farm work. Farm-to-Table initiatives partner the farmer with restaurants, food services, and so on. Connections and partnerships can lead to new enterprises such as local vineyards and wine, creameries, food service operations, coops. One new enterprise in the Cleveland area is called City Fresh, which is largely run by Oberlin College students in a cooperative arrangement. Volunteers and workers truck produce from 22 Amish farms into various locations in three counties. They sell the produce but subsidize it for low income people. This operation connects city dwellers, who normally might not know how their food is raised, with fresh and healthy produce.

In addition to marketing during the growing season, people can “add value” to products, such as making and selling salsa from home-grown vegetables. People can learn how to freeze, can, and dry fruits and vegetables, and farmers can use technologies such as high tunnels to extend their growing season (Norman, 2012). At Crown Point Ecology Center in Bath, Ohio, food is raised for a CSA and, in addition, is donated to a food bank in Akron. Their food pleases the CSA members, who visit the farm to pick up their weekly share. Their center also provides educational camps and classes for children throughout the year (Norman, 2012). A CSA in Wisconsin (Lappé and Lappé, 2003) contributes to the farmers by giving them upfront to start their growing season and enriches the members who receive organic produce during the summer and fall. Members learn a connection with their food and they enjoy the work and the produce. The farmer told a story about being at a restaurant in town: “I saw this little kid, wide-eyed, grab his mom’s arm and point at me. He said, ‘Mommy, Mommy, look. There’s our farmer!’”

Initiatives in Ashland, Ohio

I teach a graduate seminar called Place-Based Education. Students engage in readings by such authors as Richard Louv, Gregory Smith, Wendell Berry, and David Sobel. I have offered the seminar at three of the Ashland University Program Centers, and I always include a nature walk, Project Wild, and a visit to an organic farm. For many of the students, the farm visit is an entirely new experience which gives them new respect for what raising food takes.

Students have completed or planned projects to install wildlife gardens at their schools or plant vegetable gardens at their homes. They express enthusiasm for teaching their students in the outdoors and to provide outdoor experiences for their own children. Students love the outdoor experiences.

I took one seminar group to the farmers market in Ashland and asked one of the local farmers to talk about her growing practices. Students noted that it helped them to develop a better understanding of foods. Of the readings, a student commented that she liked reading about people and their relationships with food. One of the activities that I do with my Columbus students is to visit Stratford Ecological Center, an educational organic farm in Delaware, Ohio. Jeff Dickinson, director and farmer, talks about how he raises crops and animals, gives us access to the animals, and introduces their educational program. The students, most of whom are teachers, like the visit, and especially those who live nearby realize that they can bring their students to the farm. On their evaluations, students wrote that they loved being with the animals and that they would be coming back. One student wrote that she had been afraid of animals before the visit but that “I got along well with them finally.” Another student wrote,

The trip to Stratford Ecological Center was the most rewarding for me. Focusing on how our food choices are so important and that how a farm and the choices of the farmer affect our food was thought provoking.

Several of them have been touched at a deep level. One student wrote on the evaluation that the readings had made a “huge impact on me personally.” Another wrote, “What a wonderful use of my Saturdays. No matter how bad the week – the calming effect of being in the woods or on the farm was very noticeable to me.” Another wrote that the seminar was both relevant and rejuvenating: it “caught me by surprise how much I will be able to use; after teaching fifteen years – this class created a new perspective for myself.” The following quote is from a student, in her 20s, who had just been diagnosed with Celiac disease.

I never expected this seminar to have such an impact on my life, but it has been profound. It has changed the way I eat and live my life and has shown me the importance of bringing these topics into the classroom (Fleming, 2011, p. 22).

Another local initiative is Local Roots Ashland. Started in Wooster, Ohio by volunteers, Local Roots is a cooperative market that sells only local products. They have experienced amazing success and have increased their hours from one day a week to six. They now have a café inside the store. They sell locally raised fruits and vegetables, meats, and dairy products, as well as products made locally, such as breads and soaps. In 2011 they approached people in Ashland to see if they wanted to open a branch (“sprout”) of Local Roots in Ashland. They helped the store get off the ground. Similar to the parent organization in Wooster, it is a coop that sells only local products. It is open year-round

and has just expanded to three days a week. Whereas Local Roots has a paid employee, all labor is donated at Local Roots Ashland.

I interviewed Chuck Pierce, who is the (volunteer) manager of Local Roots Ashland, asking about the importance of local foods, what is working well for the store, and what are some problems. Chuck stated that local foods helps to support local farmers and keeps money in the local area. Buying local foods also conserves energy in transportation. People need to be educated that what they buy at Local Roots has been raised or made with more healthful practices and they are supporting healthy farming practices such as cover crops to increase organic matter and enrich the soil. He is pleased that Local Roots Ashland is breaking even. The products are good, and it is supporting local farmers and good farming practices. He also is proud of the fact that is member-owned, a cooperative market.

What are some problems? "Education," Chuck stated. He continued by explaining that people are generations from the farm and they don't understand the concept. One person told him, "We don't need farmers. We can go to Wal-Mart to buy food." He explained that many of the vegetables at Local Roots are heirloom and not genetically modified. People don't realize that what they are buying is grown on healthy soils and that the food has not been treated with preservatives and that they might need to shop more often. To increase sales, a group of Local Roots volunteers is working to plan some events.

Martha Gaffney is a producer-member of Local Roots, farmer, and co-owner, with her husband, of Martha's farm. She is from the mountains of Ecuador, where she grew up farming in the traditional way, what North Americans call organic. She uses "Grandma's Remedies," which is a compilation of traditional uses for herbs as medicine and in the garden. For example, she uses chamomile tea on garden plants to repel insects. Martha is a very hard worker and observes strict organic growing practices. Selling at Local Roots has helped her because, formerly, she had to make her entire year's income during the farmers market. At Local Roots, she sets the price and makes 90% of it, compared with other places she has sold, in which she makes less money because she is forced to compete with conventional growers. She can extend her growing season and sell all year around also. Additionally, she is pleased that part of Local Roots' mission is education. Educated consumers benefit both buyers and sellers.

Martha is dismayed at people's lack of willingness to pay the prices she asks, which, she believes are fair, considering all of the hard work that she puts into raising superior meats and vegetables. Her neighbors are conventional farmers, as are many who sell at the farmers market. She is forced to compete with 75 cent tomatoes. In addition, organic produce will not look "perfect," yet many people expect to see produce that does not have any insect damage. Auctions are even worse – "no one cares about organic there," she stated. Working with a middleman doesn't help her either. For a while, she sold to a city club who bought her products at the lowest prices they could and then

tripled them when they sold the products in cities, where good produce is less available. Martha is very concerned that she is seeing an increase in illnesses, such as allergies, liver diseases, and learning disabilities, and she wishes customers were as aware of the chemical industry as she is. She stated that people who are willing to pay the higher prices for chemical-free food are contributing to their own health and also "saving the family farm."

This year, for the first time, Martha started a CSA. Her five members each paid a certain price up front that helped her to get started for the year. Their investment is a willingness to share both the good and the bad of farming, so she treats them very generously. She teaches them how to garden and gives them a huge box of vegetables every week. For example, the week before I met with her, each member received carrots, cucumbers, beets, potatoes, tomatoes, squashes, garlic, and basil. She delights in showing them her rabbits and having them help to gather eggs. Last Sunday a hailstorm pitted many of her tomatoes. So she picked them and, in addition to their weekly vegetables, gave each of her CSA members a bushel of the pitted tomatoes. They were very happy because they could use them for canning and sauces.

"The future of local farming is going to be local coops and CSAs," stated Martha. She has stopped going to auctions, selling to middlemen, and attending most farmers markets. When she does sell at a farmers market, it is to promote local, healthy, organic, and Local Roots. "Please come and visit us at Local Roots," she invites. She knows that she is helping not just herself but the other growers who sell at Local roots, but "working for community and in community is great. If we get selfish, we won't get anywhere," she concluded. Martha's hope is that conventional farmers will be pressured by the market to become organic. Her neighbors have noticed that she is making the same amount of profit on less land than they are.

More and more, Martha is being invited to churches to talk about her culture. When she talks, she hopes to inspire people to go back to their roots, to live in communities that take care of each other. She wants these people to pass on their roots to their children, "so they won't grow up empty in their souls and their bodies, so they have meaning." Martha also does food demonstrations. For example, she is teaching how to combine vegetables to make salsa. She wants them to take away the message that, "you don't have to be a chef, you just have to love healthy foods."

A third initiative is a speaker series, sponsored by Ashland Center for Nonviolence (ACN) Spring 2012 at Ashland University. The theme was Creating a Caring Community: Local Foods. The introduction in the pamphlet (Ashland Center for Nonviolence, n.d.) read

Today the global food economy threatens to erase the communities that we love and depend on. Many small communities, including the Amish, are continuing a tradition of eating locally-grown foods. Locally-raised foods, found in places such as farmer's markets, co-operatives, and some restaurants,

connect people with the gardeners and farmers who are growing their food. These foods are fresher, more nutritious, and often better tasting. These foods are “food secure”: Every product can be traced to the grower. Awareness of the growing practices assures the consumer that the food is safe to eat and the farmers have taken good care of the soil, their crops, and their livestock. Buying directly assures that the farmer receives a fair price [and] helps to ensure that unhealthy short-cuts will not be taken.

Three presentations made up the series. The first was The Emerging Local Food Economy and What It Means for Ashland by Brad Masi, consultant and co-author of The 25% Shift (2010). He shared some ideas for localizing food and some of the initiatives in Oberlin, Ohio. The second presentation featured two speakers, Chris Norman, Executive Director of Crown Point Ecology Center in Bath, Ohio, presented Dirty Nuns and Guerrilla Gardeners: How Eco-spirituality and Social Justice are Changing the Face of Public Health and Local Food Systems. He spoke about the spiritual connections of earth stewardship, the center’s CSA, their connection with the Akron food bank, and their educational programs. David Kline, Amish farmer and writer, presented Who is Your Farmer? From his experiences in an Amish community and owning an organic dairy, he challenged the audience to buy from farmers they trust. The last presentation was a video, Good Food (2008), followed by a farmers market. The video, set in the Pacific Northwest, shows interview of farmers and businesses that feature local foods.

I interviewed Dorothy Collura, Assistant for the Ashland Center for Nonviolence, because she was primarily responsible for scheduling and rooms, and producing the pamphlet. The farmers market at Ashland University in March was her idea. She contacted farmers and grocery stores, ending up with about five vendors. People attended the video showing and then the farmers market. I wanted her sense of how successful the farmers market was and the series in general. Overall, she was pleased with the series. She felt as if the topic was important. She was also pleased with the farmers market although she would have liked more people. She felt as if the showcasing of local producers and being able to taste products showed people first-hand what was available.

I also asked Dottie if the series had changed her. She said that she leans toward organic foods now. Her child has special needs and has recently been diagnosed with autism. Since Dottie has been buying organically, she has seen improvements in her daughter. She also seeks out farmers markets instead of buying vegetables at the grocery store. “I’m glad I got to be part of that experience,” she stated. It was educational for the public and for her.

Conclusion

Local foods can help to build and rebuild communities and to be a catalyst for a local economy of small businesses.

Buying local foods can facilitate improvement of the soil and diversity of wildlife, as well as the health of the humans. Buying local foods can provide an income for farmers that will encourage them to stay on the land. Clearly, local foods are the answer to a myriad of social issues today. But the battle seems to be uphill. Even conservationists shop for the cheapest food they can find, regardless of health or source. What will it take to get people’s attention long enough to change their buying habits?

1. Education: Unless we achieve a balance of producers and paying customers, we will not see the benefits discussed above. We can explain about the importance of buying locally, but people need more than that. They need to get excited about how foods taste and what to do with them. Martha Gaffney wants to do food demonstrations in which customers bring food to contribute and everyone makes salsa together. Then they dance together. Local Roots in Wooster has offered classes on how to cook and preserve foods. Other people have offered classes in gardening.

2. Fun: Local Roots in Wooster has sponsored square dances and coffee houses, all to bring people together around food. Martha’s dancing is fun and it builds community. If all we do is “guilt” people into buying locally, they will do so while we are looking and then they’ll go do whatever they want.

3. Connection to the land: Farming is hard work. It is time intensive, weather is always a factor, it is seasonal, pests are ever-present. What keeps farmers farming year after year? They love the land. They can’t not farm. In the early to mid-twentieth century, many people farmed as a way of life. They were connected to the land. Getting people out to the farm and letting them get dirty is satisfying to them. The more people are connected to the land, the more likely they will be to plant their own gardens, shop at farmers markets, and support local food initiatives, including co-operatives and CSAs.

I challenge those of us who love the land, who want to conserve our environment for our children’s children, to see that health in food production means health to our land, our bodies, our families, our soil, and our communities. I encourage all of us to make local foods a priority in our lives and to get involved in local food initiatives. I hope you will continue to support and promote good conservation practices, including farming, and will add local foods to your educational efforts.

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