CONSUMER CHOICES

BOOKS, ARTICLES, FILMS, & WEBSITES FOR CONSCIENTIOUS CONSUMPTION

CC1: FAIR TRADE

The movement for Fair Trade recognizes that economic globalization perpetuates economic inequality, as well as systems of oppression such as racism, classism and colonialism. Proponents of Fair Trade seek to incorporate guarantees of both economic and social equity into systems of trade. According to the International Fair Trade Association (IFAT), Fair Trade “contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers…” <http://www.ifat.org>.

As a movement, “Fair Trade” is often put in opposition to “Free Trade,” which refers to unregulated (“Free”) trade practices. The details of Free Trade and Fair Trade economic, ethical, and social foundations are introduced above; see page 32.

Although the Fair Trade movement is alive and well at the level of international policy, many UUs have their first exposure to fair trade practices during their congregation’s “coffee hour.” Hundreds of UU congregations serve Fair Trade Certified coffee and tea during the social hour, and some also sell Fair Trade coffee, tea and chocolate for use at home. If you find the right vendor, you can even find sources for Fair Trade fruits, herbs, flowers, rice, and sugar!

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Decarlo, Jacqueline. *Fair Trade: A Beginner’s Guide*. Oneworld Publications (May 12, 2007). 192 pages. From the book: “What impact can the average consumer have on global economics? Author and activist Jacqueline DeCarlo reveals why the movement has come to mean far more than just bananas, coffee, and chocolate. Grounded in the inspiring power of Fair Trade as a positive alternative to poverty, environmental destruction, and human exploitation…explains how we can make a difference. Providing an accessible explanation of the principles behind the movement and tracing its development into the powerful economic and social justice tool it is today.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee <http://www.uusc.org> has made fair trade practices a centerpiece of their economic justice work, and has created a number of resources, activities and programs addressing fair trade practices and living wage. See “Promoting Fair Trade,” which describes UUUSC’s three-pronged effort to promote and strengthen Fair Trade <http://tinyurl.com/6rhlbb >

RECOMMENDED SUPPORTING RESOURCES

International Fair Trade Association <http://tinyurl.com/6er6v9> Defines fair trade; reviews history and standards. Particularly helpful: identifies registered Fair Trade Organizations around the world.

Global Exchange Fair Trade Campaign <http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/fairtrade/> Discusses fair trade principles, challenges, and benefits to over 800,000 farmers and cooperatives and unions in 48 countries.

TransFair USA <http://www.transfairusa.org/> Resources and information about supporting and organizing fair trade efforts in the United States.

Fair Trade Labeling Organizations International <http://www.fairtrade.net/ labelling_initiatives.html> , The umbrella association of Labeling Initiatives known as Max Havelaar, TransFair, Fairtrade Foundation, and by other national names, licenses the Certification Mark onto consumer products and promote Fairtrade in their country.

Equal Exchange <http://www.equalexchange.com> , Fair Trade program used by many Unitarian Universalist Congregations partners with co-operatives of farmers all over the world who provide high-quality organic coffees, teas, chocolates and snacks. Resource for congregational fundraising.

Locavores center their diets on food grown within a 100-mile radius of where it is sold and consumed. “Eating local” keeps consumer dollars in the local community, which strengthens not only the local economy but also relationships among neighbors. Eating local channels more money directly to farmers, as (generally) less money is spent on processing, transport, marketing, and intermediaries along vegetable’s typically 1500-mile supply chains. Many locavores believe that short “food routes” contribute less to climate change than the transcontinental journeys of conventional food.

The ethics of eating local are complex. Factory farms, pesticide-intensive crops, and farms with exploitative labor practices can all be local. Even organic tomatoes raised in a local greenhouse can use up twenty percent more resources than a tomato shipped from a distant area with a warm climate, because of the energy inputs the greenhouse requires. Driving an average car just three miles to and from a farmers’ market releases as much carbon dioxide as would shipping 17 pounds of onions halfway around the world. (Andy Jones, Eating Oil, Sustain & Elm Farm Research Center, London, 2001, Case Study 2. [http://www.sustainweb.org/chain_fm_eat.asp]. According to a 2008 Carnegie Mellon study, trips from producer to distributor account for just four percent of all food-related greenhouse gas emissions. Though the issues are complex, many are exploring the benefits of eating local. The following resources will help get you started.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Yes! (magazine): “Go Local: Declare Independence from the Corporate Global Economy,” Winter 2007. This issue of the magazine whose mission is “Building a Just and Sustainable World” focuses on supporting local markets and businesses. “Food to Stay” (p. 30) advocates for local food systems that make consumers healthier, are more profitable for producers, and build stronger communities. Almost all issues of Yes! Magazine have articles/local stories on agriculture, corporate responsibility, voluntary simplicity. Subscriptions and back copies from [http://www.yesmagazine.org] or 800-937-4451.


In this highly readable and entertaining article, the author personalizes the organic-versus-local-versus conventional debate, and opts for local.

Singer, Peter, and Jim Mason. “Eating Locally.” Chapter 10 of The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007, pages 135-150. Available for preview on Amazon.com at [http://tinyurl.com/EthicsOfWhatWeEat]. Compares eating local with eating organically, and with eating food imported through Fair Trade. Argues that many of the well-meaning principles undergirding “buying local” are problematic at best, unethical at worst, and can usually be better served through other means.


Norberg-Hodge, Helena, Merrifield, Todd, and Gorelick, Steven, Bringing the Food Economy Home, Zed Books, 2002. States the case for localizing our food economics as a “solution-multiplier” that will reduce the negative impacts of globalization.

RECOMMENDED SUPPORTING RESOURCES


Sustainable Table. “Buy Local.” [http://www.sustainweb.org/issues/buylocal/]. Information on significant advantages to eating local as well as links to other pages on the topic.

Sustainable Table. “Family Farms.” [http://www.sustainweb.org/issues/familyfarms/]. Discusses advantages of supporting family farms (small/local farmers) and its advantages of these over factory farming.

100 mile diet.” [http://www.100milediet.org/map/]. Find your 100-mile food mile radius, by zip code.


By rejecting the deterioration of the quality and variety of food, localization creates food webs that produce fresher, higher quality food, and provides food security, because it lessens dependence on distant sources. It reduces shipping, energy, and packaging and engenders farmer’s markets, festivals, and engagement. Localization strengthens the economy, as money circulates when spent on locally produced items. It also functions as a response to climate change. A growing post-carbon movement is trying to organize communities to reduce their energy use and, as with food, reduce their dependency on imported energy. To do this means thinking the entire system of a community, from transport to food to housing. Proponents do not dispute that globalization is a fact, but are simply going in another direction. - Paul Hawken, Blessed Unrest, p. 157
Animal agriculture practices have changed dramatically over the past fifty years. Technological innovations dramatically increased operational efficiency, and dramatically decreased the wellbeing of farmed animals. The farmyards of yesteryear are largely gone. Most animals raised for food never see a green field, rest in the shade of a tree, or play with another of their kind. In their entire lives, most animals raised for food will experience direct sunlight for just a few seconds, as they are moved in and out of trucks on the way to the slaughterhouse.

As scientists have learned more about the inner depths and dimensions of the lives of animals, they have recognized intricate social structures and deep ties to others of their species — especially their families. Scientists confirm that animals have emotions; for example, when cow is separated from her calf, she moans and paces for days in a visible behavior pattern scientists call mourning. Interest in these issues has generated consumer demand for more information about their food: where it comes from, how animals live, and how they die. In response, producers market “humane” labels designed to appeal to consumers.

At the grocery store, we are confronted by a maze of labels that appear to indicate how animals were raised or killed. The federal government does not regulate most of these claims, and those that are regulated may are mostly unenforced. **What do these “humane labels” mean? Some indicate true conditions under which animals are raised or slaughtered. Some are misleading. Some are pure marketing, and have no meaning at all.**

How do we sort these out and bring our values to the table? The guides excerpted on the right, and cited below, can help.

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**The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.**

— Mahatma Gandhi

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**RECOMMENDED SUPPORTING RESOURCES**


Organic farming is a form of agriculture that seeks to protect ecosystems and human health by conserving and improving soils, minimizing energy use, and raising animals and plants through natural means such as plant-based feeds, composting, crop rotation, use of manure as fertilizer, and careful use of water. Organic farming does not use commercial oil-based fertilizers and chemical pesticides. Organic farming seeks to protect native plants and animals and preserve a wide variety of "heritage" seeds and stock. To be labeled "organic" vegetables and animals must have been raised under a code of procedures and thus certified.

In contrast, industrial agriculture typically raises monoculture crops, which are "resource intense," requiring vast quantities of fossil fuels and water. Because monoculture leads to nutrient depletion of the soil and extreme vulnerability to blight, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides are to produce in bulk for the market. These run off into the waterways, often poison the workers in the fields, and leave residues in the plants and animals that humans consume. Industrial agriculture uses vast quantities of oil and water. While industrial agriculture has been touted as furthering a "green revolution," able to feed the multiplying global population, some studies have suggested that organic farms using modern and traditional techniques are actually more productive once the land has been restored.

Research into plant and animal genes has created a new phenomenon called genetically modified organisms (GMOs), which bring both benefits and risks. New plants have been created to withstand droughts, survive floods, repel pests, and flourish in difficult climates. On the other hand, genetically modified pollen fertilizing neighboring plants changes ecosystems, not to mention neighboring crops. Further, some are concerned about the long-term effects on humans and other animals consuming GMOs. Many European countries created laws to ban or severely restrict GMOs in their countries. Movements in the US insisting that GMO foods be labeled have met with little success.

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The Slow Food movement is a cultural movement to preserve traditional social customs around food and eating, including preserving regional cuisines and cultural diversity. Cultural practices emphasized by the Slow Food movement include sitting down to relax while eating, eating with friends and family, and enjoying meals that have been prepared with fresh, locally grown ingredients produced using sustainable agricultural practices that do not exploit labor. Proponents of the Slow Food movement emphasize that the enjoyment of food, eating, and the social (and spiritual) rituals tied to meals are intimately connected with an awareness of the ethics of food production, including human rights and environmental sustainability.

“Slow Food” is also a resistance movement to what is termed “Fast Food” in the United States, typified by highly-processed mass-produced food, devoid of regional or cultural variation and individual attention to detail, selected for efficiency and broad taste appeal, thus often high in fats and sodium and of low or poor nutrition. Drive-through windows and eating “on the run” or at desks while working typify a Fast Food approach to eating. The intensive high-yield farming is generally not sustainable, but depends on extraordinary levels of fossil fuels, water, and chemicals that lead to environmental degradation. Fast Food is also characterized by low-paid employees from farm to market, with exploitative labor practices in production and employees at restaurants paid less than a living wage.

The Slow Food movement is tied to other trends in ethical eating, including Fair Trade (see pg. 53) and consuming locally-grown and locally-raised food products (see pg. 54) as well as trends towards preserving biodiversity such as heirloom plants and animals. Slow Food advocates prize knowing where one’s food comes from, which often includes developing direct relationships with farmers and other food suppliers.

RECOMMENDED SUPPORTING RESOURCES

**Books and Articles**


Schlosser, Eric and Charles Wilson. *Chew On This: Everything You Don’t Want to Know About Fast Food*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin. 2007. Written for ages 9-12, this book is somewhat less graphic than “Fast Food Nation” as it examines the fast-food industry’s growth, practices, and effects on public health.

Water, Alice. *The Art of Simple Food: Notes, Lessons and Recipes from a Delicious Revolution*. Westminster, MD. Clarkson Potter. 2007. With the tenets of eat locally, eat simply, eat sustainably, the well-known restaurateur and “slow food” proponent offers simple, delicious recipes and her philosophy of food.

**Websites**

Slow Food USA. [http://www.slowfoodusa.org/]. General site describing the “Slow Food Movement”, educational resources, local chapters, events and recent news. The organization sponsors the “Food Declaration” site [http://fooddeclaration.org/] where consumers can review “Slow Food” principles and sign a supporting declaration.

La Fondazione. [www.slowfoodfoundation.org]. International organization that defends food biodiversity, safeguards the environment and the land, endorses sustainable agriculture, protects small producers and their communities, and promotes gastronomic traditions.


**Movies / Videos**

*Fast Food Nation*. 2006. 114 min. A fictionalized account of Eric Schlosser’s book, starring Wilmer Valderrama (That ’70’s Show) and Catalina Sandino Moreno (Maria Full of Grace).

*Super Size Me*. 2004. 100 min. This documentary follows Morgan Spurlock as he embarks on a 30 day diet of McDonald. An intriguing look at obesity and one of its primary causes – fast food.