

The Carbon Footprint of Local Food

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→ At first glance, buying local produce seems a no-brainer in terms of minimizing carbon footprint. The shorter the distance the goods travel, the less carbon they emit in their transport – right?

Right – but transport is not the only consideration. Take the tomatoes you want to use in your spring salad. Sure, you could buy local, but the tomatoes will most likely have been grown in a non-insulated greenhouse that requires heating and ventilation. Creating the heat will involve fossil fuels, and quite possibly produce more carbon than transporting the fruit from where it can be grown outdoors.

Food miles – the distance produce must travel from source to market – is an important consideration in assessing carbon footprint. But as the UK Government and others struggling to create a system of carbon labeling are finding, the issue is far from straightforward. The small airplane symbol that supermarkets in some places are starting to use to show that goods have been air freighted may be easy to understand, but ignores the carbon footprint of the raw materials, methods of production and other factors that go into producing the food. Organic food may be air freighted, but can have a much lower carbon footprint in its production.

Eventually we will find our way through this labyrinth. We will have worked out the environmental cost of all parts of the process, and be able to accurately calculate the complete carbon footprint for a tomato, a carrot or a pound of coffee beans wherever or however it's produced. At the same time, we will have developed carbon neutral greenhouses, and be able to produce a wider range of food locally without punishing the environment.

Of course, some produce will always need to be imported, whether they are organically produced or not. Depending on where you live, it might be coffee, or sugar, or bananas, or oranges. We could be dogmatic, and cut these from our diets, but there are many communities around the world that depend on these crops and their distant markets for their livelihoods. Sustainability needs to be looked at in the round. Poverty is often a leading factor in carbon emissions in many regions, where, for example, people may fell forests for fuel or want of more efficient methods of cooking or heating. Simply counting the carbon from food miles can overlook wider environmental impacts.

Eating local foods in season is a fine ideal, and one that we should generally work towards. In the meantime, we need to be sensible. Shipped-in organic food can have a lower carbon count.

We have to acknowledge that, for the moment, calculating the carbon footprint of food is an inexact science. For now, we are going to have to make difficult choices based on incomplete information. So it's best to strike a balance, trying to grow stuff where and when it is supposed to grow, without condemning ourselves to a winter diet of cabbage and potatoes, or the land to carbon intensive non-organic practices, or other communities to hardship and higher carbon outputs.

ABOUT ZEROFOOTPRINT

→ Zerofootprint is a socially responsible enterprise whose mission is to apply technology, design and risk management to the massive reduction of our environmental footprint. We operate both in the for-profit and charitable domains through two entities, Zerofootprint Software and Zerofootprint Foundation using shared technology.