

PLANET FOOD

April 2001

FOOD MILES

How far should our food travel?

Editorial - April 2001

With 'foot and mouth' disease devastating the country, I find it hard to think about anything else. Not remembering the 1967 epidemic – I was only 6 – I couldn't have envisaged anything so awful happening for farmers, for local businesses and for people living in the country.

This month, I had already planned to focus on buying local produce. Ironically, the speed at which the foot and mouth epidemic has spread around the country has led quite a few commentators to pick up on the distances animals are transported. This is, in part, because small local abattoirs have been closing in droves. One of the biggest pressures they faced was stringent EU health and safety legislation, which was not adapted for small operators.

Perhaps the most positive thing to come out of it all will be a serious review of the intensive and global approach to agriculture and greater support for local producers and suppliers.

Already, we have seen a resurgence of local, seasonal produce. Shops are setting up with local produce as a key selling point. And it's available at farm shops, farmers markets and organic or vegetable box schemes. This is a very positive trend and there are a number of reasons for it.

Probably the main reason is that people in Britain are waking up to the quality of local food produce. They also like knowing where their food is coming from and how it has been grown. Whether we are buying cheese, lamb, cabbage or rhubarb, meeting the people who have produced it and knowing that it has not travelled from the other side of the world is a real boon.

British farmers are going to need our support, more than ever before. My local butcher is committed to only sell meat produced in this country. Perhaps the national response to the crisis in the countryside will be to take the same approach. Buy local and help your community at the same time!

WELL TRAVELLED FOOD

Worldly goods

The effects of globalisation, both positive and negative can be seen, wherever you go. In Mongolia, a country that has survived on local milk products for thousands of years, you find mainly German butter in the shops. In Kenya, butter from Holland is half the price of local butter. In Spain, the dairy products are mainly Danish. And, in England, butter from New

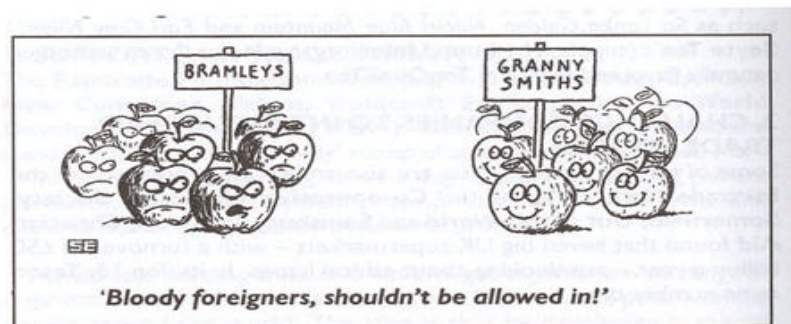
Zealand is usually considerably cheaper, even though it has been shipped from the other side of the world.

Whether it is a question of butter and lamb from New Zealand, cut flowers from Guatemala, peas from East Africa or strawberries from Spain, it seems absurd that people are becoming increasingly dependent for their every day 'needs' on products that have travelled thousands of kilometres.

Food miles

Food, quite simply is travelling further to get to our tables. In the UK some 20 million tonnes of food is imported – and 12 million exported – each year. Most of this food travels considerable distances. Granny Smith apples fly nearly 23,000km (14,000miles) from New Zealand, for example, while prawns jet in 20,000km (13,000 miles) from Bangladesh. And even within the UK food is on the move: it travels 50% further around the country than it did just 15 years ago.

Even within the UK, food is transported 50% further than it did at the beginning of the 1980s.



All this transport uses a great deal of fuel. Flying commodities by air, for example, is now commonplace, even though air transport uses 37 times more fuel per tonne of food transported than does sea transport. The real problem here is that fuel prices are too cheap – and airlines are even being given tax breaks on the fuel they buy.

For every 10 litres of orange juice we drink in Europe 1 litre of diesel fuel will have been used for processing and transport¹

Ghost acres

Nor is it just human food that travels. Animal feed, too, is also making intercontinental trips. For every one acre farmed in the UK, a further two acres are farmed overseas to supply food. These have been dubbed 'ghost acres' because – although they are not immediately visible – they are nonetheless used to support our diets and farm animals.

Or, to take another example, Brazil is a major supplier of soybeans for European animal feed. To produce these soybeans it has cleared its Cerrada plateau forest – about 12 million acres.

WHY WORRY ABOUT FOOD MILES

The 'Food Miles' issue is a complex challenge for anyone interested in ensuring that our food and drink are produced sustainably. Here are some of the issues:

Animal welfare: The further you have to ship animals to market, the more they are likely to suffer. At the same time, animals may be sent to countries where welfare standards are lower, as when the UK exports lambs, sheep and ~~elaves-calves~~ to continental Europe or Australia exports animals to Asia.

Countryside: As farmers have to compete on world markets, they are forced to focus on keeping costs down. Destruction of farm hedgerows to make bigger fields and accommodate bulky machinery has been one of the most obvious results of this trend. This means less habitat for wildlife, including birds and other natural predators, and again a greater need for pesticides.

Developing world: Paradoxically, the ability of developing countries to feed themselves may be compromised as they start to grow more food for export to rich countries. The result can be that food grown locally is not available for local consumption, or is too expensive for local budgets – so that people become malnourished or, in extreme cases, starve.

Energy: Apart from the fuels needed for transport, a great deal of energy is used by the greenhouses, cold storage facilities and other elements of the food chain, which bring us food out of season.

Farming patterns: The landscapes and wildlife diversity we appreciate in the countryside often reflect long-established patterns of farming. Now, as factory farming becomes the norm and foods are flown half-way around the world, the pressures on smaller and more traditional farms are intensifying. Tens of thousands of farming jobs have been lost, with farmers leaving the land in droves.

Local economies: Cheap imported food is bought at supermarkets, with the result that any local shops sourcing food locally, often cannot compete. This is a double loss, in terms of activity and income. Money spent on local produce tends to stay in the area, to be spent on other local goods and services, whereas 80 to 90 percent of money spent in supermarkets may be 'sucked' out of the area to distant shareholders.

Packaging: More packaging is needed to protect produce that travels. It is easy to forget that as consumers we do not see a lot of the packaging used, because its purpose is to protect produce in transit. And up to two-thirds of UK packaging is used for food and drink.

Pollution: Transport is one of the biggest contributors to air pollution. Cutting down on unnecessary journeys and using less damaging forms of transport can make a real difference.

Toxins: A lot of produce needs to be treated with pesticides, to help preserve it during long-haul travel, to prevent damage and to extend its shelf-life. Examples include citrus fruits,

which are often waxed or treated with fungicides. Some produce also requires treatment to stop pests hopping on board for the ride and causing problems in the importing country.

Clearly, none of us can hope to address all of these issues. But asking for local, seasonal food and drink sends powerful signals through the markets that these issues are important to us – and that we want the food chain and supermarkets to take them seriously.

Recipes

Spring lamb

“I think all of my own produce tastes better”

Things are not as they should be for anyone rearing lambs this Spring. Farmer, Mark Houghton-Brown, is no exception. Although his flock are not, at the moment, directly threatened by the foot and mouth epidemic – the nearest outbreak is 20 miles away – he has very strong views on the subject. And he has many friends who are facing the slaughter of their herds, with anguish. He supports the idea of vaccination.

Mark runs an organic farm in Wiltshire. He has 650 sheep, 150 rare Wiltshire Horns –the largest flock in the country - and 500 Leyns, a welsh breed, from a peninsular south of Anglesey. He says that the only sheep movement that he has had on his farm in the past two years, was when he bought a ram about a year ago. Effectively he has a ‘closed flock’, which means that he rears replacement mothers and therefore has no need to move sheep around from farm to farm.



Wiltshire Horns

Moving animals around and intensive farming leads to more disease and therefore more medicines - although organic standards do allow some medicines, a key objective is to avoid needing them. It is the massive movement of animals that is also a major factor in the rapid spread of foot and mouth. Apparently there were a staggering 1.25 million sheep moved in the two days between finding the disease in the UK and a restriction being imposed on animal movements.

Reducing the sheep's exposure to disease is a key part of Mark's farming philosophy. Like other organic farmers he avoids worming his animals by rotating where they graze. It is the lambs, which are most susceptible to worms. They pick them up by nibbling at grass, which is contaminated by the dung of last year's lambs. By grazing sheep one year, cows the next and growing crops the next, Mark is able to offer 'clean' grazing to his stock.

Most of us would not see sheep farming as a particularly intensive business. But Mark points out that on some marginal land, where sheep are often reared, even 10% too many will lead to over-grazing. And farmers are subsidised on a per head basis, so it is not uncommon for this to happen. Whereas Mark rears about 3 ewes and their lambs per acre, a more intensive system might have 5 or 6 ewes on an acre.

One major benefit for Mark in breeding Wiltshire Horns is that they lose their wool – it is used by nesting birds. This means that he can avoid sheep dipping against maggots and other skin parasites. Organophosphate sheep dips are still commonly used, although there have been major concerns about the effect on farmer's who come into contact with them.

Mark sells most of his meat direct from the farm. He says that by buying it this way, consumers will be paying less than at supermarkets, and more will be going to the farmer. His meat is pound for pound - or kilo for kilo – about the same price as non-organic lamb, but you have to buy a minimum of half a lamb, with all the cuts, rather than selecting one joint or a pound of chops.

Getting locally source, good quality meat, produced in an environmentally sound way, at the same price as anonymous, supermarket offerings, that may have travelled half way round the world, has to be a good deal.

In Conversion

Rob Simpson farms on the Somerset Devon border near Wellington. He is in conversion to organic, with another year to go.

Like most organic farmers he has mixed stock – cows, pigs, geese, chickens and, of course sheep. He has a flock of 160 Devon Closewool, a local breed, as well as some Welsh Mountain sheep, which were bought to ensure the farm was eligible for a 'ewe premium' government payment. Rob would have preferred to have got his Devon Closewools up to the required number by breeding his own replacements, but the current system does not make allowances for this. Another criticism of the system is that it encourages a lot of sheep movement around the country, as farmers are trying to make sure they qualify for the payment.

Rob wormed his sheep when he bought them, to make sure they were not bringing worms onto clean land. Henceforth, he says that the rotation system he uses should ensure they are worm-free. He has not yet had to dip his sheep and says that he will try to avoid the need, if possible. However, unlike Mark Houghton-Brown, Rob's sheep are woolly and he is keen to use the wool, so dipping, according to organic standards, may be necessary.

One of Rob's concerns about the foot and mouth epidemic is over the amount of disinfectant being used, and what impact it might be having when it runs off into the water course. As yet he is not very close to an infected area but, of course, is still being affected. On the bright side, he thinks that the foot and mouth disease is already encouraging more people to buy local produce, because they know where it comes from. He sells to private customers and farmers markets.

Foot and mouth vaccination

Mark Houghton-Brown has been campaigning for a vaccination programme in response to the foot and mouth epidemic.

He says that once an animal has been vaccinated they will be protected from getting foot and mouth. The high potency vaccines start to work in 3 days. In a week 90-95% of animals are protected and in 3 weeks they are fully protected. This would mean that if 80-85% of animals in the country were vaccinated the population would be virtually immune. We would then be able to stop the horrific slaughter policy, re-open footpaths and return to some semblance of normality in the countryside.

The main arguments against large-scale vaccination are as follows. First, there is some concern over whether there are enough supplies of the vaccine to carry it out. But second and most importantly, the government are determined to protect the export market for our meat. Whilst a vaccination programme is in place, the UK would be prohibited from exporting meat or livestock.

But increasingly, it is argued, that we are paying too high a price for this objective and the current policy of slaughter is not working. The export market is worth about £310 million per annum, whereas the cost of this epidemic already exceeds £9 billion. The tourism industry and supporting businesses are being devastated.

The government may well be coming round to a partial vaccination programme. The worry about this policy is that any animals that are vaccinated, as a 'fire-break' around infected areas, would subsequently be slaughtered, so that exports could be quickly resumed. This would mean that rare indigenous flocks, such as Mark Houghton-Brown's Wiltshire Horns and Rob Simpsons Devon Closewools, could be wiped out.

A full-scale vaccination programme would not deny the UK the possibility of resuming exports, it would just take more time – perhaps 12-24 months. Meanwhile, we could be improving our agricultural policy and promoting smaller, local more sustainable practices. If this were to happen, the catastrophic foot and mouth epidemic could well be a cloud with a silver lining after all.

GLOSSARY

Sheep dipping:

Sheep dipping is another major area of difference between organic and non-organic sheep farmers. This is done to avoid sheep scab as well as maggots and other skin parasites. Most sheep are vulnerable to maggots. Flies lay eggs in the faeces, which sticks to the wool around their bottoms. When the maggots hatch they eat the sheep's flesh. Organophosphate sheep dips are still commonly used, although there have been major concerns about the effect on farmer's who come into contact with them. Organic farmers are encouraged to avoid the need for sheep dipping where possible. Even the alternatives methods are not without their problems. One replacement chemical is 1000 times more toxic to aquatic life, and run-off from sheep dips can end up in rivers. But there are strict controls on safe use and disposal of these chemicals incorporated into organic standards.

Local food initiatives

There are a number of organisations campaigning for more local food. These include:

- Friends of the Earth, Real Food campaign
- Women's Environmental Network, Green up your own backyard
- Sustain, Food Miles Report
- Henry Doubleday Research Association, which encourages people to grow food in the garden
- Soil Association, who publish a directory of local food producers

ⁱ Wuppertal Institute, Germany