

# 'Local food' revolution is no solution

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## FULL TEXT

In a recent op-ed piece, Green party leader David Coon tells us the way forward in New Brunswick lies in producing more food locally by using what are essentially old-fashioned technologies and ways of doing things ("Local food essential to prosperity," April 28, A12).

Sure, reverting back to something much closer to our ancestors' lifestyle will cost consumers more money. But on the positive side, won't more jobs will be created, healthier food produced, and humanity's environmental impact lessened?

Mr. Coon's stance begs a few questions. For instance, why were modern agricultural practices and long-distance trade in foodstuff developed if they had no significant advantages? How do you create more jobs by encouraging people to spend more of their hard-earned money on local food, in the process leaving them with less resources to spend on other things?

Why insist that New Brunswick promote food self-reliance, rather than asking everyone in the province to produce more of their own food themselves? And where are all the victims of food poisoning or vitamin deficiencies that can be blamed on imported food?

I don't know what Mr. Coon he eats for breakfast. I'm pretty sure, however, he didn't extol the virtues of local food in this newspaper by using a mechanical typewriter made in New Brunswick and by riding his horse to the post office. Following his logic about food production, however, this is what the good people of this province should do in order to secure a more prosperous future.

After all, feeding local forage to horses would cut on petroleum imports and create local jobs. Manufacturing mechanical typewriters locally would not only create local jobs, but also encourage people to consume more paper produced here.

But why stop there? Why not also revert to wooden sailboats made of local wood where local fish would be stacked in locally made wooden barrels? Think of all the jobs created in the process!

All of us, however, intuitively understand that something is wrong with this "backward is the new forward" rhetoric. What Mr. Coon fails to see is that prosperity and jobs are created when people specialize in what they do best, trade with each other and, as a result, have more time and resources to innovate in order to create new technologies that are less problematic than existed before.

Say what you will about tractors, but they don't eat up to a quarter of the food they produce, they don't get sick and they require a lot less maintenance than workhorses and mules once did. Similarly, importing cheaper chicken meat from locations where it can be produced more efficiently leaves more money in the pocket of consumers -

money that is then spent on other things, in the process creating new and better jobs.

True, sometimes creating the better means destroying the good, but in the end everybody benefits.

Mr. Coon also claims that paying more for local food is good for the environment. There is simply no evidence for this. Indeed, most local food is more expensive simply because it is produced less efficiently in a region that is denied some natural advantage over another, be it better soil, more rain or sunshine, or perhaps a drier local climate less conducive to pest problems.

Making up for natural disadvantages through other means, however, is typically bad for the environment. For instance, if local tomatoes produced in a heated greenhouse are more expensive than similar tomatoes imported from a location where nature provides the heat free of charge, then what the higher local price tells us is that local tomatoes require more resources for their production than whatever amount of fuel was needed to import tomatoes from further away.

The more inputs required to produce food, the greater the environmental impact is. What countless scientific studies on the topic have demonstrated is that the distance travelled by food items typically tells us nothing about the environmental impact of agricultural production.

By concentrating food production in the best locations, by using the latest technologies and by relying on inputs of all kinds from all over the world, humanity now produces a lot more food on a lot less land than in the past. This is why all over North America and in most other parts of the world too (including China and India), one can observe abandoned marginal agricultural lands that have reverted to forests. This is another good thing for the environment.

For over a century now, each generation of urbanites sees a rebirth of some type of back-to-the-land movement. Yet the evidence has long been in. Agricultural romanticism is a one-way road to greater poverty and a guarantee of greater environmental harm.

The people of New Brunswick should by all means consume local food when they get their money's worth, but they shouldn't be guilted into spending more, for a lesser quality product, only because it is produced locally.

Pierre Desrochers is a professor of geography at the University of Toronto and co-author of *The Locavore's Dilemma: In Praise of the 10,000-mile Diet*.

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