



Praising a '10,000-mile diet,' author blasts local food movements

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Pierre Desrochers doesn't buy the 'buy local' mantra.

The Canadian economic geographer and author has his own theory: that large-scale, global and unbridled trade is the answer to averting climate change, protecting the food supply and revitalizing economies.

Publicly rejecting policies promoting local foods in favor of inexpensive, imported food hasn't been easy. Recently, a longtime food activist branded Desrochers a "baby killer." And family gatherings with his brother, a former politician and onetime promoter of local foods in Canada, are admittedly awkward.

"We had agreed that when I would go back for Christmas, that we wouldn't talk about this," he said.

In the last decade, the trend toward rejecting large-scale, industrial agriculture and embracing small, local farm operations has helped the local food movement grow into a \$5 billion industry. But Desrochers says he believes this movement is misleading and harmful to consumers.

In his recent book "The Locavore's Dilemma: In Praise of the 10,000-Mile Diet," which Desrochers wrote with his wife, policy analyst Hiroko Shimizu, the two argue that the local food movement is burdening consumers with higher costs. It requires more energy and, therefore, emits more greenhouse gases than foods from a large-scale system; it creates incentives for cheating, as vendors are tempted to mask conventionally grown foods as "local"; and it lacks the food safety oversight and control that bigger operations can afford.

"All of us eat local food when it makes sense," he said recently at an event hosted by the conservative Cato Institute. "When food is in season, and you get a good quality-price ratio for it, you don't need a local food movement to push local food."

A distraction from the problem

The marketing of local foods grossed \$4.8 billion in 2008, according to an Agriculture Department study -- four times what had been estimated.

"The Locavore's Dilemma" draws its name from the titles of two books: "The Omnivore's Dilemma" by University of California, Berkeley, professor and local foods movement supporter Michael Pollan, and "The 100-Mile Diet," a chronicle of efforts to eat only local foods for one year by Vancouver, British Columbia, writers Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon.

Both "The Omnivore's Dilemma" and "The 100-Mile Diet" were published in 2007, the year the term "locavore" was included in the *Oxford American Dictionary*. Since then, global food price indexes have skyrocketed. Agricultural land grabs in developing countries have proliferated. Farmers have faced record heat waves and natural disasters. And global incentives for biofuel production have farmers dedicating an increasing amount of land to fuel crops.

These changes only strengthen the argument for large food systems, said Desrochers, who maintains the solution is more globalization, not less. A staunch libertarian and free market advocate, Desrochers said he believes a commitment to local food is blind to the bigger issues.

"Local food is a distraction," he said. "The real problems are biofuels, barriers to trade, water subsidies, stuff like that. But unfortunately, a lot of well-meaning people are focusing on local food production at the expense of everything else."

Even Japan, Shimizu's native country, could do a little better, said Desrochers. Instead of maintaining protectionist rice subsidies, he argued, it would make more sense for the country to scrap its policy and send farmers to grow Japanese rice in Brazil.

Meanwhile, he said, the need for farmers to adapt to climate change and, in some cases, grow different crops or move from their land only underscores the need to globalize further.

"You are always safer having risks spread over a large area than a small one," Desrochers said. "So as far as climate change and food security is concerned, well, if it's a food security issue like any other, spread the risk. People can adapt; those that cannot will import food from people who can adapt."

Apples to apples

A 2010 Desrochers study critiqued food miles as a measure of sustainability and efficiency. A high-volume cargo ship from Central America can carry produce more

efficiently, emitting less greenhouse gases, than a diesel pickup truck from a small farm two counties over, he said.

Conceived by British academic Tim Lang, the concept of "food miles" -- the distance from field to plate to assess a crop's carbon footprint -- has raised questions. Most of the energy that goes into growing food comes from the production, not transportation, of crops.

Indeed, shorter-distance travel does not mean less fuel consumption on a per-pound or per-gallon basis, said Miguel Gomez, an assistant professor of economics at Cornell University and fellow at the Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future.

A recent Agriculture Department-commissioned study of five foods -- blueberries, apples, dairy, meat and leafy greens -- supported this. Gomez, who worked on the study of apples, found that apples delivered from Washington state to Syracuse, N.Y., could have a smaller carbon footprint than ones grown locally in New York.

In a more recent study, Gomez also found that efforts to reduce the food miles in the dairy sector tend to increase costs that are passed on to the consumer.

Nevertheless, Gomez does support the local food movement. In some cases, it creates local economic opportunities that would have been impossible within the global agricultural model, he said. In upstate New York, for example, a farm-to-school program has created a new market for smaller apples for children, a size that would be less desirable on a supermarket shelf.

"It makes sense having a local system for certain products," Gomez said. "It is an extremely good [move], economically, socially and environmentally."