

Food Miles

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I came up with the term 'food miles' to try to help consumers engage with an important aspect of the struggle over the future of food – where their food come from, and how. As we know, in the 20th century, there has been an astonishing revolution in how food is grown, processed, distributed, sold and even cooked. This intensification of the supply chain means that raw ingredients are used from often very distant sources. Yet consumers do not know this transformation that goes into their mouths every day. In market terms, they lack the necessary information.

I first used the term 'food miles' in *Food File*, a British Channel 4 TV magazine programme,¹ in November 1992. I took the opportunity given to me by that occasion to highlight the distance that food travels from production to point of sale or consumption. The slot in *Food File* was called 'Mouthpiece'. It was an opportunity for someone to

¹ Food File, produced by Eleanor Stephens and Rupert Parker (of Stephens-Kerr Productions) for Channel 4, London.

sound off about something they cared about. So with the TV producers I was able to suggest to people watching that they might like to judge their food, not just by price or what it looked like, but also by its food miles, how far it had travelled.

I chose to highlight this issue at that time, as I was writing and campaigning a lot about the absurdity of food trade. I was working in a NGO, with others around the world, trying to persuade policy-makers renegotiating the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, the forerunner of the World Trade Organisation) to think about the public health and environmental implications of their proposals to liberalise trade in agricultural products. Big food manufacturers and traders, obviously, wanted to open up new markets. They saw environmental, health and cultural critics as small-minded protectionists, against progress. My colleagues and I took a different view. That what is meant by 'progress' is something to be debated. Progress for whom? At what cost?

Nevertheless, I could see that the drift of policy was favouring liberalisation. Culture would therefore be even more central to shaping the future of food. Hidden ecological, social and economic consequences would have to be made more open to consumers – if not on labels (my ideal), then in their consciousness.

So the point of making the programme and coining the term was to highlight the phenomenon in a simple way, one which had objective reality but also

connotations. The idea was to encourage people to think about where their food comes from and how it is produced and got to them, not just what they consume.

Rupert Parker, Eleanor Stephens and I did an eight-minute piece in which I was in front of camera and visited Covent Garden and interviewed traders and the head of Argyll (now Safeway), Sir Alistair Grant. He said he'd like to source more produce from the UK, I argued that the drift of the food supply chain to increase food miles was absurd. I then did a surreal run around a HUGE map of the world (filmed from 15 metres above me!) with a shopping trolley clocking up the 'food miles' of each food I purchased. I proceeded, on camera, to make a 'local' shopping trip of mostly UK or near European foods, clocking up much reduced food miles, to make a contrast.

It looked surreal and was intended to be amusing, but the message was serious. The programme ended with me suggesting a tax on food miles to curb absurd and damaging energy use.

The programme was received very enthusiastically and I decided to pursue the concept it further. I was then chair of the Sustainable Agriculture, Food and Environment (SAFE) Alliance which had about 30 national member organizations campaigning on food and the environment. (It merged with the National Food Alliance in 1999 to make the 109-member organization Sustain, an alliance of which I am also chair.) So we set up a research project to

investigate and put flesh on the bones of the ‘food miles’ idea.

Angela Paxton at the SAFE Alliance produced the *Food Miles Report* in 1994, giving powerful evidence and figures to justify the term.² But my intention had been to invent a phrase that encapsulated the complexities of distance, energy, culture and trade in some form that ordinary people could use and find meaningful. Before the SAFE report came out, the phrase was already creeping into usage, actively promoted by SAFE campaigning and by our promoting it in talks and writing. Sustain, new even bigger alliance into which the SAFE Alliance merged, took the whole evidence base further with its excellent *Eating Oil* report in 2001.³

By the late 1990s, the term had spread out of the specialist contexts – sustainable agriculture, criticism of supermarkets, food journalism – where it had first been used. It has now entered everyday use. It is in the Oxford English Dictionary – something that even impressed my mother! In the early 2000s, the debate moved up a notch when the UK Department of the Environment, Food & Rural Affairs conducted a long research project into whether food miles could be a useful government indicator for sustainability.⁴ Inevitably, it found that

² Paxton, A (1994). *The Food Miles Report*. London: Sustainable Agriculture, Food & Environment (SAFE) Alliance.

³ Jones, A (2001). *Eating Oil*. London: Sustain. http://www.sustainweb.org/chain_fm_index.asp

⁴ Defra (2005) *The Validity of Food Miles as an Indicator of Sustainable Development*. London: Dept Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/reports/foodmiles/default.asp>

food miles are complex. The notion of food miles combines a number of features: energy, sustainability, variety, forms of transport.

As an academic, I relish such complexity. Prof Jules Pretty and team at Essex University and I continued to explore this in a study of the UK food system,⁵ which showed that there is an huge hidden cost to the unnecessary trucking – and particularly flying - of food. The vast majority of this burden occurs within Britain. In fact, long-distance fair-traded food products currently are not such a huge environmental burden. But that would grow if their exports grew, obviously. So, the message remains generally to ‘buy local to save the planet’. But what is ‘local’ is relative.

And there are ethical issues at stake too. How are we to choose foods? Personally, I remain committed to what might be called ‘bio-regionalism’ as a policy goal for 21st century food. I see a new imperialism emerging in the name of globalised trade. On the one hand, all progressive people support fair-traded goods, and anything that ensures the primary producers in developing countries get their fair share. But on the other hand, to abandon our farming to exploit theirs because land and labour are cheaper and then shift produce vast distances to feed the rich, hardly seems progressive.

A bio-regionalism will probably have to emerge, where rich countries end their parasitic relations

⁵ <http://www.farma.org.uk/Archive%20files/ElsevierPressrelease-BuyLocalFoodtoSavethePlanet%20PDF.pdf>

and poorer agricultural producers feed themselves and their neighbours not the over-fed rich. Bio-regionalism requires us to begin to link health to the environment, biodiversity to social justice.

As to ‘food miles’, I am proud and still surprised by how the term has entered daily use, but I would not like to claim too much for its value. It’s like saying we should aim for fresh food. What is ‘fresh’? What do we eat in winter if that is our goal? Academics are only just beginning to engage with how to operationalise the criteria for choice. A local greenhouse grown tomato in mid winter is more energy inefficient than bringing a sun ripened one a long-distance. There are trade-offs.

Choice is complex! But I do think that all of us wanting decent food, located in place and coming to our plates from ecologically sound production, have an obligation to make our messages simple, understandable and positive. That’s the strength of food miles. Everyone understands it. In Michael Heasman’s and my Food Wars book, we try to take this further, giving 15 rules for a new food culture.⁶

Despite the important ecological and energy issues that the food miles debate has got into, the simplicity of the idea of ‘food miles’ is worth hanging on to. It is why the term is being ever more widely used.⁷ Given a choice, which food do I choose? The one with less food miles.

⁶ see list on next page.

⁷ see, for instance, the Scottish Executive (2005). Choosing our Future: Scotland’s Sustainable Development Strategy. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive / SEERAD
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/12/1493902/39032>

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15 new cultural rules for ecological public health eating*

- Eat less but better
- Eat simply
- Eat no more than you expend in energy
- Eat equitably: don't take food out of another's mouth
- Eat a plant-based diet with flesh more sparingly, if at all;
- Celebrate variety; get biodiversity into the field and thence to your plate; e.g. try aiming to eat 20-30 species per week;
- Think fossil fuels; energy transporting food to you or you to food = oil;
- Eat seasonally, where possible;
- Eat according to the proximity principle, as locally as you can; support local suppliers
- Learn to cook quickly producing simple meals; leave fancy food for really special occasions
- Be prepared to pay the full externalised costs; if you do not, others will;
- Drink water not soft drinks;
- Be aware of the hidden ingredients; look at the label to locate the unnecessary salt and sugars; if they are there, don't buy.
- Educate yourself without becoming neurotic!
- Enjoy food in the short-term but think about its impact long-term; be confident. It's your food, your children's future!

*** expanded from: Tim Lang & Michael Heasman (2004), *Food Wars: the global battle for mouths, minds and markets*, London: Earthscan, 362pp, ISBN 185383-7024**