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The Locavore Movement: Eating locally in Southeastern Wisconsin

In North America alone, meals can travel over 1,500 miles before ending up on an average American's dinner table (Barnes p. 1). This amount of mileage along with a variety of other factors contributes to an increasingly large carbon footprint as well as global warming. Throughout the years, agriculture has shifted from a strict traditional approach to an industrialized method of production. When consuming the products of these industrialized farms, individuals are taking responsibility for the amount of pollution resulting from production and transportation of the food. Most people are unaware of pollution caused by the processing of food as well as any alternative to decrease their carbon footprint. There is currently a movement in the United States that pushes people to eat locally grown foods in an effort to reduce pollution. Living as a "locavore" means going out of the way to eat locally in an effort to reduce the carbon footprint of individuals and lead a healthier lifestyle (Oxford Dictionaries). The content of this paper will address some of the benefits and drawbacks of locavority, some problems associated with the locavore movement and their solutions, and finally examine some businesses embracing the movement. Locavority is very beneficial because it contributes to a solution to climate change, a resolution to food deserts, and also an improved local economy in addition to community strength. Although there are drawbacks that are keeping the locavore movement from fully blossoming, eventually the advantages will outweigh the shortcomings.

There are many benefits to becoming a locavore, ranging from supporting local communities to living a healthier lifestyle. Not only does the locavore movement provide local economic growth by supporting local businesses, but it also provides an eco-friendly option by reducing the carbon footprint produced (Barker). It provides higher quality food because local businesses and farms are more likely to produce products with natural and organic methods, as well as cut down the emissions from transportation by large corporations (Grubinger). These corporations normally ship products to their destinations by means of semi-trucks, airplanes, and ships that consume fossil fuels and emit harmful gases into the atmosphere. Buying locally cuts down on the transportation need, thus reducing pollution. The nutritional value of the food is related to the amount of pesticides and chemicals used in the production (Edwards-Jones). Large corporations are mainly the ones who use these harmful chemicals and one way to ensure that food is organically safe to buy from local farms. Overall, buying locally is healthier and more environmentally friendly, but also supports the economies of local communities through such actions as buying from local farms.

A local farmer in the greater Milwaukee metropolitan area is running a sustainable farm at Amitaba Gardens where they are using biofuel to run the machinery. David Wolinsky uses a biodiesel that consists of cooking oils that are collected in the Milwaukee area. Although he does use imported petroleum and oil, this biofuel replaces a large portion with a more localized option. In addition to supporting a sustainable environment, Wolinsky also supports the local community that buys from his farm. "We raise the food on our farm and sell it directly to the

community, in some cases not more than a block from the farm” (Wolinsky). The locality of produce also keeps the price as low as possible in an effort to keep the products affordable for the impoverished local community. The Fondy Market is one that is particularly successful in the lower income area. This market takes advantage of the program using the electronic benefit transfers (EBT) and emphasizes outreach to those in the impoverished community. “But that’s about it, and unfortunately I don’t think that’s enough”, lamented Wolinsky. Amitaba Gardens runs an assistance barn located on their farm, which is used to subsidize the CSA program that they offer. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a program where interested consumers typically pay a certain fee in order to receive a share of seasonal produce on a weekly basis from the farm (Local Harvest). “We do have a CSA program... but we are not CSA certified, largely because of the mess of paperwork involved” (Wolinsky). “[If] our members demanded certification of us, we certainly would not have any problem getting it”. Amitaba Gardens does not hold a third person certification for anything they do. Places like Amitaba Gardens and the Fondy Market help support the impoverished local community and provide a source of fresh local produce. These are among a few of the challenges associated with the locavore movement; however, they are outweighed by the benefits.

One of the problems is geographical location. According to Dr. Bill Barker, Director of the Office of Research Policy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, in an interview conducted on April 25, 2013, “Areas of suboptimal access to healthy and affordable food exist in every city in the nation, whether it’s in affluent suburbs or more problematically in poor urban communities”. These areas that Dr. Barker is

referring to are known more formally as food deserts, which are districts that lack the means to access healthy and affordable food. This is often replaced by cheaper fast food restaurants. These are usually found within communities that have a lower fixed income as well as larger cities. Efforts are being made to combat these problems in Southeastern Wisconsin. On April 16th in Madison, The Madison Edible Landscape Proposal was passed through legislation allowing the planting of edible shrubbery on city-owned property. According to Elizabeth Royte, an influential, environmentally-conscious author, the biggest problem for low-income people is being able to access transportation or time to shop at distant markets where healthy food would otherwise be available. This proposal helps to eliminate food deserts by offering a fresh and healthy option for access to fruits and vegetables. Elizabeth Royte also maintains that it is important to buy from a source that is close to cut down on the carbon footprint created in the transportation of these products. This proposal would help in replacing readily available and cheap fast food for those without the opportunity to access fresh food.

The Madison Edible Landscape Proposal is important to the city as it seeks to remove “economic barriers to food production” (Barker). After obtaining a permit, this proposal allows city residents to grow local fruits and vegetables for their consumption. It overrides a proposal that is already in place, removing restrictions on the size of the plants and the planting location. The proposal offers higher quality food at a lower carbon footprint to those who may or may not already have access to healthy affordable food. With the removal of the transportation and storage costs associated with corporations shipping and distributing their products, we will see a

dramatic decrease in the size of the carbon footprint. This environmentally friendly solution to food deserts also facilitates the growth of a tightly knit community. Farmers' markets and local businesses would benefit from this proposal because this offers a new option in terms of food product availability. In turn, this would result in greatly expanded urban food networks (Barker).

Farmers' markets in southeastern Wisconsin are making it easier and more convenient for people to obtain fresh produce and meat from local farmers and vendors. These farmers' markets include farmers from approximately a 20 mile radius. These farmers bring mostly organic goods to sell to those who are interested in eating healthy as well as supporting their local economy. Farmers participating in the local farmers' markets provide information about the different methods of farming used to produce their goods, ranging from the amount of pesticides used to whether or not they are using genetic modifications. Along with running a local farmers' market in Fort Atkinson, Cynthia Holt is making efforts to include fresh local food in schools and providing easier ways for those living in impoverished communities to obtain the fresh produce. Recently the Fort Farmers' Market received a grant to have electronic benefit transfer (EBT) machines, which allow people using food stamp cards to shop at the market. Additionally, Cynthia Holt is currently working to develop a program that will allow those who are using a food stamp card to have the money they spend at the market be matched. "For every dollar they'd get 50 cents off" (Holt). Of course this program is not in place yet, Holt is working extensively to get the program started. Farmers' markets also offer opportunities for farmers and shoppers to donate and receive tax deductions.

Volunteers working with the local food pantry receive donations of excess produce from farmers and monetary donations from shoppers and farmers alike. “Last year it was over one ton of food in four months that was donated to the local food pantry” (Holt). These local food markets facilitate the growth of the locavore movement by conveniently providing access to locally grown produce and offering opportunities for members of impoverished communities to participate. Although farmers’ markets have been a source of locally grown food for quite some time now, there is a new trend beginning amongst local restaurants in southeastern Wisconsin that incorporates eating healthy, local food into the dining experience.

Local restaurants and businesses are promoting the locavore movement by utilizing these new sources of fresh, local produce when possible. But there are several obstacles keeping businesses from completely converting to locavority. Sometimes committing to a local supplier can be more environmentally friendly but also more expensive. For small businesses this can prove to be a very difficult hurdle to overcome. “Local products are often more expensive and, while worthwhile, customers do not always understand or appreciate the need for higher prices in order to source local products” (Reichwald). Although every business has different problems to address, they all face a similar challenge in balancing the demands to localize as well as turn out a profit.

Making a splash in Whitewater, The Black Sheep is a new local restaurant that sources 85% of its products locally in addition to making their own baked goods. “[Locavority] is important both of us...we like higher quality ingredients, we

like to support our local economy,” said Sarah Smith, referring herself as well as to Tyler Sailsbery, the owner of The Black Sheep. “We’re very involved with it, and we try to stay as local as possible.” This restaurant is working with other local restaurants in the area to try and strengthen the local community and economy by working with each other rather than competing against each other, which is why The Black Sheep advertises its local suppliers extensively. The owner’s also buy locally in an attempt to save a small farming industry that is dying due to the growth of large industry farms using genetically modified produce and animals. “They are modified to the point that our children are getting [affected]: ADD, all those different allergies, and gluten intolerance” (Smith). Citizens of Whitewater can enjoy eating locally with a plethora of restaurants that go out of their way in order to provide locally bought food to ensure that it is healthier and fresher.

These restaurants also include The SweetSpot is a small local café based in Whitewater, Wisconsin making similar efforts to follow the locavore movement, but the owners are finding that it may be easier said than done. The inconsistency of the supply stream from local farms and vendors has proven to be a difficult obstacle to overcome. “Sometimes a farmer is just out of something. That doesn’t translate well to a quick service restaurant” (Reichwald). This act of maintaining relationships with local farmers in order to secure a local supply of products can be very time consuming and requires a greater effort than dealing with a smaller number of larger corporations. In addition, finding local resources is often more expensive than working with nationally scaled corporations. (Reichwald) Even when small businesses may be able to find local suppliers, some products simply cannot be

grown in the local area. For example, although the SweetSpot is able to incorporate a large amount of local products into its menu, it is impossible to buy 100% locally because items such as coffee must be grown in warm climates, unlike the climate of Southeastern Wisconsin.

Like small restaurants, large companies are beginning to join the locavore movement. Sysco, a large food vendor, is currently working on creating a new program that will match up small businesses and Wisconsin farmers looking to sell their produce, meat, and dairy products. This is a co-operating program that uses Sysco as a distribution network. Although it has not launched yet, Lacey Reichwald, a co-owner of the SweetSpot, is very excited about the opportunity to secure local products from different farms through one distributor. This program should make it much easier for small businesses to access fresh local produce in Southeastern Wisconsin.

On the other hand, larger corporations such as Chartwells Dining Services are also making efforts to serve fresh local food and make its business more sustainable. Since Chartwells supplies more than two million meals a year, it is nearly impossible to convert to local suppliers, but efforts are being made regardless. “18.5% from a dollar perspective was bought within a hundred mile radius” (Hinspater). The state of Wisconsin requires that every state agency of this scale purchase 10% of its products locally. Chartwells is going above and beyond this standard in order to make an effort to be more sustainable. Unfortunately, just like the SweetSpot, the expenses associated with locavority have proven to be an

issue. For example, Chartwells spent almost 15,000 dollars on making the switch from foam products to better, more sustainable products. Even the waste from Chartwells is used to promote the local economy. The leftover waste from its campus locations is shipped of to the local wastewater treatment center, and from there it is recycled and distributed for use as animal feed on local farms. Although it is nearly impossible for businesses with such high demands to source all of their supplies locally, Chartwells is going above and beyond expectations in contributing to the local economy, creating a more sustainable workplace, and reducing its carbon footprint by reusing and recycling.

The locavore movement is inspiring the reduction of food miles from companies and their use of transportation worldwide. 28% of the total of 6,702 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in the United States resulted from fossil fuels consumed in transportation in 2011 (EPA). Although it has decreased from 7 million metric tons in 2006, there is still a lot more that can be done in that regard. "...the stuff in stores these days, especially in winter times, is from Mexico..." (Dr. Eshelman). This is a concern to Dr. Bruce Eshelman, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, because Mexico, in addition to being thousands of miles away, lacks the regulations and controls one could expect when buying from local farms. In Southeastern Wisconsin, businesses are beginning to wise up to the locavore movement and are reaping the benefits. The Black Sheep and The SweetSpot are among those who have come to the realization that locally produced products are fresher, healthier, and come at the price of a smaller carbon footprint. Although the successes of these restaurants cannot be solely attributed to the

movement itself, it obviously has played a large role. The locavore movement may be utilized to reduce pollution as well as solve the problem of food deserts, which can be seen with the Madison Edible Landscape Proposal. Not only is the locavore movement a solution to pollution, but it also can be used to strengthen local economies and create a more tightly knit community. The locavore movement should be seen as beneficial for the reasons stated previously as well as a real solution to climate change. Even though this one movement will not solve climate change on its own, it is definitely a step in the right direction and will have a positive influence on the reduction of global warming. Eating locally provides a healthier lifestyle and encourages increased community strength and a stronger local economy, which is why everyone should make an effort to buy locally whenever possible.

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