



## The return to a more basic and traditional approach to foodways and the three pillars of sustainability

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### Abstract

Current food practices are not sustainable for the health of the planet or of humans. The industrialized food system has led to the destruction of natural lands, an increase in unhealthful large livestock feeding operations, rising pollution and greenhouse gasses, and a decline in human health. In this project, the potential positive impacts of emphasizing and remembering the geographic and cultural origins of our food will be demonstrated and explained. The importance of returning to more traditional, localized food practices will be presented. This report will partially meet the requirements of the NTD 450 course and will contain the ways these practices can directly improve human physical and mental health, fuel the incomes of local communities and reduce global waste and greenhouse gas emissions. The outcome of this research will help local policymakers and social welfare departments such as the Pennsylvania Department of Health and Human Services to identify and recognize not only the need for such changes, but ways in which they can be achieved.

**Keywords:** foodways, sustainability, localized food

### Introduction

The declining health of the planet, of humans, and even of local economies can be traced directly to the origins of our food and how it is prepared. Not only is the health of the earth declining, but so is the health of its inhabitants. A return to more basic and traditional food practices would benefit these issues in a multitude of ways. Emphasizing on local, fresh, and in turn mainly healthier foods will allow individuals to form a deeper connection with the origins of their food. Through developing this association with and understanding of where their food comes from, people will be able to revisit a more meaningful relationship with the rituals of eating, which often will result in increased time spent with family and loved ones. This would benefit human health on both a physical and mental level, as well as help to slow the rapidly declining health of the environment.

### Industrialized Food System and Environmental Health

The industrialized food system makes a wide variety of food items from various points around the globe readily available at consumers' fingertips. It makes food more easily accessible than ever before requiring little-to-no thought of how the food is acquired, cultivated, or actually reaches local grocery store shelves. It has led to a disconnect between people and the foods they eat. The industrialized food system ensures large crop yields through its use of agrochemicals, fertilizers, herbicides, and more <sup>[1]</sup>. Much of the need for larger crop yields is due to the growing demand for livestock feed to keep up the output from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). Animals are mass-produced for slaughter in tight factory farm environments with the mass use of pharmaceuticals to promote optimal weight gain <sup>[1]</sup>.

Not only can the "mass use of agrochemicals and hybrid plants," <sup>[1]</sup>, be damaging to the health of the livestock and

the humans eating these animals; it can also ravage our environment. The tremendous use of pesticides, fertilizers, herbicides, and other agrochemicals to produce large crop yields is contaminating the earth's water through runoff into streams, rivers, and oceans, resulting in dead zones in both fresh and ocean water. This leads to a lack of fish and sea life. The water supply can also become contaminated with runoff from fields where cattle are raised, contaminating nearby crops and, or the water used for irrigation of these crops <sup>[2]</sup>.

This widespread contamination can result in dangers such as E. coli outbreaks usually in leafy greens, but also in other crops, directly affecting the health of the humans consuming them. Furthermore, the distance that food commonly has to travel from production to consumer not only increases carbon output but also diminishes the ability of local agriculture and community businesses to thrive.

The industrialized food system, and industrialized agriculture are responsible for mass amounts of global food waste, the conversion and clearing of 70% of the world's grasslands, 50% of savannas, and 25% of tropical forests, 70% of annual human water usage, and 35% of greenhouse gasses. This makes agriculture the single largest source of greenhouse gas output <sup>[2]</sup>.

Food waste is also a large concern in the industrialized food system, around 30% of food that is produced goes to waste <sup>[2]</sup>. Returning to smaller scale food practices would help to tackle this problem head-on.

### The Return to Traditional, Localized Food Practices

Emphasizing locally cultivated and obtained foods has a multitude of benefits for all three pillars of sustainability. Socially, it allows people to connect with their local communities. Economically, it allows for communities to thrive, offering new job opportunities as well as putting

money back into the hands of local entrepreneurs and growers. Environmentally, it not only expands soil health and biodiversity, but supporting small, local agriculture lessens the need to obtain mass-produced agriculture and meat and decreases distance traveled; directly improving human health and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. For certain cultures, local food systems are especially vital. Take for example, the world's Indigenous peoples, many of whom experience higher rates of obesity and undernutrition. Local food systems play a key role in not only maintaining culture for these people, but also in the maintenance of their health and for their economies and food security [2, 3].

### Cultural Origins

It is key to remember the geographical and cultural origins behind the foods we eat. "Food binds people together; it is individually consumed, entering into our singular bodies, but often communally grown, processed, and prepared. To feed a village, it takes a village or, in this age of globalization and industrial food, many villages and, as such, food is often a primary marker of individual and group identity" [4].

Preparing culturally authentic food usually involves quality, whole-food ingredients which can often best be obtained locally. The care that goes into purchasing fresh, local ingredients and preparing them with and for the family requires thoughtful consideration about food choices, versus the "grab and go" consumption to which our society has become accustomed. In countries other than the continental United States, there is a sense of pride and care that goes along with purchasing ingredients and preparing a meal. Many Europeans, for example, make far more trips to the grocery store and spend much more time selecting ingredients than their American counterparts, viewing meals as an experience rather than just a necessity or afterthought. Regaining a relationship with one's cultural origins can lead to a better understanding of where one's foods are coming from and re-enforce emphasis on the importance of preparing a meal and consuming it with family [4, 5].

The French are a perfect example of the correlation between a cultural love of dining and health. Studies conducted in the 1990s revealed that the French were generally more likely to think of food in terms of dining pleasure, versus the Americans' view of food in terms of nutrition and health risks. Yet ironically, the studies showed that the French have a dramatically lower rate of cardiovascular disease than Americans, who were fatter despite their leaner diets. Today, the obesity rate in America is a shocking 33.9 percent almost twice that of the French. And Italians, who also celebrate a love of cuisine, boast an obesity rate as low as 9.8 percent [5].

### Human Health

In addition to cultural differences, the modern, industrial food system has also had a negative impact on human health. In today's society, especially in the United States, there is an emphasis placed on fast and easy meals. Food and eating are looked at as an afterthought, and people are spending less time preparing and consume meals than traditionally was the case. This not only results in less time spent with families, but also in a disconnect between people and the ingredients they are consuming, leading to the consumption of processed, convenient meals that are not necessarily very health-promoting or nutritionally balanced.

Studies have shown that people who take the time to sit down and slowly enjoy a meal have more nutritious diets rich in fruits and vegetables [5]. Spending time with family for meals not only promotes a sense of mental well-being and belonging [4], but also teaches children from a young age where the foods they are eating come from and the importance of eating a nutritious, well-balanced diet [5]. Growing evidence has illustrated that the presence of community-supported agriculture or community gardens has a positive correlation with both physiological and mental well-being [6].

### Local Economies

Traditional foodways are often associated with fresh, in-season ingredients that have been sourced locally. Returning to more traditional and localized food practices will benefit the economic sustainability of global and U.S. communities in a multitude of ways. In one study, as "compared to mainstream counterparts, revenue per unit for producers selling locally ranged from fifty percent greater for apples to 649 percent greater for salad mix" [5]. Not only does purchasing local ingredients lead to higher revenues, but also directly allows local communities to thrive through an influx of new job opportunities, federal funding, and chances for more disadvantaged people to have fresh, nutritious ingredients available to them [5].

### Connectivity

A healthy, biodiverse landscape will not only benefit the ecosystem, but will also benefit the health of those living in it. A connection between the environment and its inhabitants is vital to the future and well-being of not only the earth but to the health of humans as well [7].

The slow food movement is one example of a move in the right direction, placing emphasis on the importance of obtaining ingredients that are local and fresh and that embracing and remembering heritage and culture surrounding food can lead to the protection and preservation of the planet's waterways and soil, reduce food waste, and protect biodiversity as a whole [3]. Reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and global food waste is vital to sustaining our ability to nourish and feed the planet and its inhabitants [2, 3].

### Argument

Current foodways are not sustainable to the planet or its inhabitants on an environmental, economic, or social level. In order to protect the biodiversity of the landscape, economies of local communities, and health of human beings, it is vital for local policymakers and the earth's inhabitants as a whole to be able to grasp the importance of understanding food's geographical and cultural origins as well as the potential benefits the return to more traditional, localized food practices can have on these issues.

### Conclusions

Enabling local communities to become more self-sufficient in the sourcing of their foods and revenue will not only benefit the economy, health and environment of the specific communities, but that of the United States as a whole [5]. Agriculture and produce are not the only resources that can benefit local economies. Supporting local fisheries in places like Maine and Canada is not only crucial to maintaining the livelihood of their inhabitants [8], but also plays a key role in

maintaining a bond between citizens and local food culture and tradition. Take, for example, lobster rolls in Maine. Traditions like this help to amplify a deep cultural meaning behind the foods locals eat and reinforce the importance of keeping local fisheries afloat. They also demonstrate how social and economic sustainability intertwine.

This research will help local policymakers and social welfare departments such as the Pennsylvania Department of Health and Human Services better understand the importance of returning to traditional, more localized food practices. It will also demonstrate various ways in which it can improve the environmental, physical, and economic health of communities in and around the United States and how such goals can be achieved. Demonstrating the need for and supporting the funding of local agriculture, community gardens and grower's markets are great places to start. Another beneficial step would be implementing policies around what to do with potential food waste from within the local food system, such as delivering edible food items that would otherwise go to waste to local food banks and offering incentives for non-consumable food waste to be donated/turned into compost for local community gardens and farms.

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