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The Myth of the Rabid Locavore

Stephen Budiansky, self-proclaimed "liberal curmudgeon," has stuffed together another flimsy, flammable straw man out of boilerplate anti-locavore rhetoric on the *New York Times* op-ed page, with the patronizing title *Math Lessons For Locavores*.

It's a familiar formula: start by establishing yourself as the voice of reason by professing your own deep appreciation of the merits of locally grown food as evidenced by the bounty of your own back yard. Then, launch into a diatribe against a mythical army of dour, sour food mile nazis, including 'celebrity chefs and mainstream environmental organizations,' whose support for local farmers is based on wildly misguided and naive notions about curbing one's carbon 'foodprint.'

Throw in a bunch of dubious and/or irrelevant statistics that appear to be truly locally sourced -- i.e. pulled out of your own behind. Add a few disingenuous claims about the environmental benefits of industrial agriculture. Wrap things up with a statement so ludicrous that you have to publish it on your own website because hey, the *New York Times* is only willing to go so far:

"...eating food from a long way off is often the single best thing you can do for the environment, as counterintuitive as that sounds."

Budiansky's argument tars all eat-local proponents with the same broad brush, warning us that we're turning into a bunch of joyless, sanctimonious schmucks who are flimflamming an unsuspecting public:

For instance, it is sinful in New York City to buy a tomato grown in a California field because of the energy spent to truck it across the country; it is virtuous to buy one grown in a lavishly heated greenhouse in, say, the Hudson Valley.

Sinful according to whom? As I wrote on page 27 of Rodale's *Whole Green Catalog*:

Bear in mind that buying local is often the most low-impact choice -- but not always: an out-of-season local tomato grown in a fossil fuel-heated greenhouse could consume more energy than one that's been field grown and shipped from Mexico.

But hey, what do I know? I'm just one of those local-food advocates who brandishes statistics that are "always selective, usually misleading and often bogus" to back up our "doctrinaire assertions."

That describes Budiansky's own modus operandi in a nutshell. His op-ed focuses almost exclusively on the question of how much fossil fuel is used to grow and ship food, and concludes that the amount of energy used is negligible in the grand scheme of things.

Sure, and because eggs weigh less than the grain it costs to feed the factory farm hens that produce them, it was presumably quite energy efficient to ship those 380 million factory farmed eggs that have since been recalled for possible salmonella contamination from Iowa to fourteen other states.

But energy efficiency is only one small part of the equation when you add up the reasons to buy local. Other factors include: flavor and nutrition; support for more ecological farming practices; reduction of excess packaging; avoidance of pesticides and other toxins; more humane treatment of livestock and workers; preservation of local farmland; spending one's dollars closer to home; the farmers' market as community center, and so on.

Budiansky totally ignores these issues, except to challenge the assumption that sustainable agriculture is better for the environment than industrial agriculture. After establishing the folly of food miles, he goes on to note:

Other favorite targets of sustainability advocates include the fertilizers and chemicals used in modern farming. But their share of the food system's energy use is even lower, about 8 percent.

Again with the energy usage! Geez. As if that were our big beef with fertilizers and chemicals. What about soil erosion, pollution, loss of biodiversity, the rise of superweeds and antibiotic-resistant infections, the dead zones in our oceans and rivers, exposure to contaminants, and all the other environmentally disastrous consequences of 'conventional' farming?

According to Budiansky, the real culprit, when it comes to squandering energy, is us:

Home preparation and storage account for 32 percent of all energy use in our food system, the largest component by far.

He cites the miles we drive to do our grocery shopping and the energy it takes to run our fridges, dishwashers, stoves, etc. But what do any of these things have to do with whether you choose to buy food locally? Your fridge uses the same amount of energy regardless of where the food you put in it came from.

If Budiansky sincerely cares to examine what constitutes a truly low-impact diet, why does he ignore one of the biggest sources of food-related wasted energy in the average American household? As New Scientist recently noted:

More energy is wasted in the perfectly edible food discarded by people in the US each year than is extracted annually from the oil and gas reserves off the nation's coastlines.

What's so maddening about sloppy op-eds like this is that they give fodder to folks who hate the very notion that their food choices have any consequences beyond their own waistlines and bank balances. At a time when global warming is surely fueling fires, floods, and drought all over the world, we need to have an honest conversation about how the way we eat contributes to climate change.

What we don't need is dishonest misrepresentations and tiresome stereotypes about the eat local movement. If you actually read what us good food folks have to say about eating ecologically, you'll see that the emphasis is on adopting a predominantly plant-based diet, eating foods when they're in season, limiting your consumption of animal products and processed convenience foods, and avoiding the chemicals and pesticides that are used in conventional farming.

Buying local produce is obviously a part of the equation. But to portray it as the sole consideration of sustainable food advocates is to adopt a lazy contrarian position that is guaranteed to generate controversy, and just as sure to do absolutely nothing to engender a meaningful discussion about these issues. Budiansky needs to be taken out to the foodshed and pummeled with his own lousy logic.

At the end of his blog post elaborating on his op-ed, he writes: "More seriously: environmentalism ought to be about pragmatism, not dogmatism."

Seriously? Such a deeply unserious piece such as his doesn't deserve to take up valuable real estate like the *Times* op-ed page. Though, like most real estate, it's worth less than it once was. Publishing stuff like this doesn't do much for the Old Grey Lady's property values.

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