

Green Scene: Protect the Environment When You Purchase Food

by Elaine Golds

(published in The Tri-City News - Friday, July 7, 2006, page A19)

[Title in Tri-City News: Purchasing local and organic foods can help the environment]

People often wonder what they can do in their daily routine to protect the environment. One way to make a difference is through the choices we make about food purchases. Given that we all spend a significant amount of money on the food we eat, supporting sustainable agriculture can send a strong message that will reverberate through the food supply chain.

In an earlier column, I described how the purchase of bird-friendly fair-trade organic coffee ensures habitat for our migratory birds as well as a fair market price and safer working conditions for small family farmers in Central and South America. Other fair-trade organically-grown products such as tea and chocolate are now available in some local stores. While the production of these food items does not provide winter habitat for our birds, it does provide similar benefits in terms of fair profits to family farmers and a more sustainable way of farming.

In general, buying organically-grown products supports sound agricultural practices that promote soil fertility, enhance biodiversity, reduce water pollution from nitrogen run-off, avoid conventional pesticide use, consume less energy and support family farmers rather than factory farms. While scientific studies have apparently not proven that organic produce is more nutritious, people who eat organic food have been shown to have fewer pesticide residues in their body. In my experience, organically-grown food is often bursting with flavors that conventional produce lacks. Have you ever compared the taste of organically-grown carrots to the regular ones? It's encouraging to see so many local grocery stores now offering an increasingly broad selection of organically-produced food.

Much of the fresh produce in our local stores comes from California where some harmful agricultural practices are allowed. Due to intense lobbying efforts of the American agricultural industry, methyl bromide is allowed to be used in California as a soil fumigant. In contrast, in Canada, its use has been prohibited because it destroys the ozone layer. Conventionally-grown tomatoes and strawberries are some of the crops produced in the USA with the aid of methyl bromide. Thus, when I purchase American-grown tomatoes and tomato products, I always ensure that they are organic so that my purchase is not supporting environmentally harmful practices. Paying a little extra for organic canned tomatoes seems like a small premium to pay to avoid damage to the stratospheric ozone layer that protects us from the harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun.

It's also important to support local agriculture and protect the farmland in our Agricultural Land Reserve in British Columbia. As fuel prices rise, being able to grow food close to large cities will become even more critical. A report from World Watch indicates the ingredients for a typical North

American meal may travel up to 4000 kilometers between farm and table. Such a meal can use up to 17 times more fossil fuels than locally-produced food. A Vancouver couple recently made a well-publicized decision to eat only food grown within a 100-mile radius of where they lived. While this proved to be a considerable challenge last winter, this time of the year the Fraser Valley is lush with farm-fresh berries, vegetables and other food.

Several Farmers' Markets in Coquitlam and Port Moody now bring such produce within convenient reach of our doorsteps. Supporting these markets helps to ensure a decent livelihood for local farmers, preserves agricultural land around Vancouver and supports more sustainable farming. On Sunday morning July 16, the Coquitlam Farmers market will celebrate its 10th Anniversary of bringing delicious BC food to local residents. If you have never patronized a local Farmers' Market, this would be an ideal time to start.