

Should we buy Organic?

Globalisation has led to increased awareness of how our consumer choices can affect the world around us. This has signalled the growth of [ethical consumerism](#), whereby consumers ease their conscience by buying locally produced, organic, or fair trade produce. Organic produce has proven to be particularly popular, and the most debated.

Organic agriculture emerged as an [alternative to the self-defeating methods of conventional farming](#) which produces high yields at the cost of environmental sustainability, resulting in scarcity of the natural resources on which it depends (Youngberg et al, 1993: 153). More and more people are choosing to buy organic produce because of ethical considerations like sustainability and animal welfare, as well as a belief that organic food is healthier. But on what basis do we assume the merits of organic agriculture?

As organic moves into the mainstream, with greater awareness and availability, there is increasing disagreement about whether or not the claims made by organic supporters are legitimate. Critics of organic farming have pointed to the hypocrisy of these claims arguing that they can be contradictory or at least optimistic about the reality of organic farming. It is these claims that we will discuss in order to determine whether or not it is worth paying for organic produce.

What does 'organic' mean?

- The use of **artificial chemical fertilisers and pesticides is restricted**, encouraging the development of healthy, fertile soil and more varied crops.
- Animals are reared **without the routine use of drugs and antibiotics**, common in intensive livestock farming (SA 'What is organic?', online).

Organic farmers must follow a strict set of standards to be certified as organic.

There are 10 official certification bodies in the UK, all of which have different criteria for what they deem 'organic' (Hickman, 2005: 26).

The Soil Association (SA) is the largest of these organisations. Founded in 1946, the SA is the "oldest and most experienced organic certifier in the UK", licensing "about 70% of the organic food on sale" (SA, 'The SA's Role, online). Therefore we will focus on the SA as a representation of organic standards in the UK and the claims made in support of organic farming.



Image: Soil Association Logo (Hughes, 2007).

The 'Animal Welfare Debate':

Does the reality on organic farms contradict the SA's claims of higher animal welfare standards?

The SA's regulations stipulate that organic animals:

- "Must have access to fields (when weather and ground conditions permit) and are truly free range;
- Must be fed a diet that is as natural as possible and free from genetically modified organisms;
- Must only be given drugs to treat an illness (not for increase productivity or growth)" (SA online, 'Animal Welfare').

But is it more humane to use antibiotics when alternatives fail?

The SA claims that "no system of farming has higher levels of animal welfare standards than organic farms working to Soil Association standards" (SA, '10 Reasons to eat organic', online). The SA states that "if antibiotics are needed to prevent the suffering of a sick animal then that treatment must be used" (SA, 'Animal Welfare', online).

However, strict regulations on the use of antibiotics in organic farming have resulted in some farmers not administering medical treatment to suffering animals, for fear of 'contaminating' produce with chemicals that may render it useless for sale on the organic market (Drudik, 2005, online).

> The Advertising Standards Authority of the British government ordered the SA to delete the claim that organic produce is "more humane to animals" from its marketing material, saying there is no justification for the claim (ASA, 2005, online).

> Likewise, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals cited an EU funded study, saying that "a restricted use of veterinary medicines and food supplements... could be linked to the most common health problems identified on organic farms - for example, external and internal parasites... and nutritional deficiencies" (RSPCA, 2008, online).



Image: Organic Dairy (Southern Mamas, 2008).

Background Image: 'Blue sky' - Fearech at.net, 2008, online

The 'Air Freight Debate':

Are organic producers contradicting their claims of environmental responsibility by accumulating 'food miles'?

[Food miles are "the measure of the distance a food travels from field to plate" (Ellis, 'Food Miles', online). The term is usually used in reference to the carbon emissions caused by the transport of food via air travel.]

Should food that has been transported via air freight be certified as organic? Critics argue that certifying air freighted organic produce:

- > Air freight generates "177 times more greenhouse gases than shipping", accumulating food miles and thereby contributing to dangerous climate changes (IPCC, 2001, in Wallgren 2006: 234). Even the SA itself admits that the use of air freight "swamps any possible benefits from growing food in an environmentally friendly way" (SA 'Organic Newsflash', online).
- > Contradicts the SA's claim that "organic farming [is] a means of alleviating poverty and preventing environmental degradation in developing countries" (SA, 'Air Freight Consultation', online). By allowing the use of air freight to transport produce, organic farming contributes to climate change, which is predicted to affect the world's poorest countries the most (Shah, 2008, online).
- > Encourages farmers in developing countries to become reliant on air freight and exportation.

The Soil Association's Dilemma...

"A move by the SA... to ban air freighted products would be catastrophic to the future of [the organic] business and the tens of thousands of people... who depend upon [it]" (Freshinfo, 2007, online). This would mean organic producers in developing countries would no longer have access to markets like the UK.

So... disallowing the certification of air freighted organic produce might...

- Amount to a **hidden trade barrier**;
- **Severely reduce the range of organic produce on offer as air freight is the only means of transport quick enough to keep produce fresh.**

The UK relies on imports for "91% of the fruit and vegetable that we eat" (DFID, ND, online). There is not enough agricultural land in the UK to supplement a loss of organic food imports. So, the SA continues to allow the certification of air freighted organic food.

The 'Health Debate':

Is organic food healthier, as the Soil Association believes, or could the scientists who contradict them be right?

"Between 3.5 and 5m people globally suffer acute pesticide poisoning every year" (BBC News, 3rd January 2000, online). The British Medical Association argues that "some pesticides can be stored in our body's fatty tissues for years, raising concern about them being carcinogenic (cancer causing), mutagenic (causing birth defects) and neurotoxic (damaging to our nervous system)" (SA 'Organic Food and Nutrition: The Basics', online).

However, the BNF feels "it would be irresponsible to promote organic food over non organic food as being better for you as there is not enough strong evidence" (Cox, 2007, online). Likewise, the government's independent watchdog, the Food Standards Agency does not believe that the amount of pesticide residues on fruit and vegetables is high enough to harm us (Cox, 2007, online).

Some scientists have found evidence that many **toxic chemicals, in low concentrations, may actually be beneficial to health** (The Telegraph, 2005, online). One study found that small amounts of toxic chemical intake reduced the incidence of cancer (The Telegraph, 2005, online). Over thirty separate studies of about 500,000 people "have shown that [those] occupationally exposed to much higher levels of pesticide... have much lower rates of cancer overall" (The Telegraph, 2005, online). Some scientists even believe that **organic food "could be positively dangerous, especially when it was fertilized with sewage containing potentially harmful organisms"** (BBC News, 2000, online). Some even assert that "many of the natural pesticides produced by plants are potentially more of a risk than the synthetic ones used in conventional agriculture" (BBC News, 2000, online). So the SA's claims about organic food's health benefits may not only be contradictory, but might also be dangerously misleading.

Organic by numbers...

"Over three-quarters of UK households buy 'some organic food' and the sales value of organic products is close to **£4 million per day**" (Cottingham and Winkler, 2007: 29).

A 2006 survey found that **49% of consumers believe organic food is healthier** - more than 4 times as many as disagreed with this view. Around **three-quarters of consumers believe organic production is kinder to the environment**, with only 3% disagreeing. Only 9% of consumers disagree with the view that 'animal welfare' is of higher quality on organic farms' (SA 2006, in Cottingham and Winkler 2007: 31).



Image: Organic Fruit and Vegetables (About Organics, 2008).

See attached page for full bibliography.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the organic industry must not become complacent and forget how far there still is to go before organic produce is truly accepted into public consciousness. It is clear that in order to gain complete acceptance, the claims made by organic supporters cannot appear to be contradictory or misleading, and must ensure that they reflect the reality of organic farming.

The popularity of organic produce has had a significant impact on retailers and producers as they have been forced to re-examine their ethical standards in order to appeal to the increasingly prominent consumer-conscience. This suggests that **despite its imperfections, organic farming does offer a tangible way of using what we buy to influence the world around us**. The rise of organic farming has fostered goodwill among otherwise competing interests - that of increasing profits coupled with ethical responsibilities towards the environment and sustainable development. So **perhaps it is still more ethical to accept organic farming's imperfect standards than none at all**.

The success of organic farming has increased awareness to "the undeniable fact that all of agriculture - indeed all of society - has an urgent stake in the concept of sustainability" (Youngberg et al, 1993: 300). This success has therefore created a **new discourse of sustainability and the future direction of agriculture**, so for this, if not anything else, we should buy organic produce.