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BRIAN HALWEIL: Think Globally, Eat Locally

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About a year after I came to Worldwatch, a columnist for the conservative *Washington Times* took advantage of me. During a long interview about what it was like to work for an environmental group, he homed in on one out-of-context statement about how hard it could be to research and write on trends—biodiversity decline, population growth, the spread of AIDS—that aren't always positive. "It can be pretty depressing," he quoted me, in an article that essentially made the tired claim that environmental groups were unreasonably gloomy.

Yes, it *can* be a strain to follow these trends. But with seven more years under my Worldwatch belt, I have found that our work can quite often be inspirational, too.

For example, last spring I wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* encouraging Whole Foods, the largest natural and organic grocer in the world, to stock more locally produced foods. The company was about to open its third Manhattan supermarket—right across the street from the Union Square Greenmarket, New York's oldest farmers market. Why not invite local growers to hand out samples during high-traffic shopping times, I suggested, or buy up excess produce at the end of the farmers market? Or feature New York produce in the store's prepared foods? The Whole Foods spokesperson I contacted while researching the piece was reluctant to make any commitments, even after I mentioned other New York supermarkets' support for local farmers.

The op-ed came out a few days before the store opened, apparently without much of a splash and without any irate calls from Whole Foods executives. But several days later, a *Times* story on the opening quoted the commitment-phobe I had interviewed as saying that the store "plans to buy up to 20 percent of its produce from farmers in the tri-state region, some of whom also sell their food at the Greenmarket" and that "the chefs who cook the prepared foods at Whole Foods will shop in the Greenmarket and feature two to four Greenmarket specials daily."

That was a pleasant surprise. I harbored no illusions that my op-ed prompted the change of heart; buying local draws customers into stores and Whole Foods is a smart company. Maybe the op-ed just reminded them that the writing is on the wall. A Whole Foods "team leader" later invited me to speak about the local foods movement at a Locally Grown Summit for staff in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. The summit coincided with a planned regional campaign to build closer ties with nearby farmers, fishers, and food makers and to educate staff and



customers on the benefits of buying and eating local.

It's too early to know what success this program will enjoy, or what impact it will have on Whole Foods' buying practices. But recently I got an e-mail from the president of a large Long Island distributor specializing in local produce: "Whole Foods contacted me after your article in the *Times*.... They have requested I put a program together for them to procure more Long Island grown produce. I have informed the Long Island Farm Bureau of the apparent success your article has had."

There have been other sources of inspiration. A big food service provider contacted me to say they were rolling out a line of "Long Island Grown" selections, partly because an employee had read my book, *Eat Here*, which includes a chapter on the history and future of farming in my own area, the eastern end of Long Island. Last year, when I did a radio interview in Philo, California, one of the hosts mentioned that *Eat Here* had inspired Philoans to start a local food policy council. And, perhaps most rewarding, my wife and I have watched a farmers market we launched in our home town of Sag Harbor flourish as droves of shoppers come to enjoy fruit, vegetables, shellfish, jams, and other local goodies.

That's far from "depressing." In fact, although we at Worldwatch may not always know exactly how our work is being used, we do get glimpses now and then, and they give us reason and hope to keep on with it.

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