

Can we afford the true cost of food?

What is the overall cost of commercial farming and the fast food industry? Is the price of organic, locally grown produce more valuable than the overall cost of cheaper fast food?

I was first interested in chickens when I was assigned chicken duty, which involved feeding the school chickens three times a day, collecting and cleaning their eggs, and either letting them out of their coop or ushering them back in. I grew a connection with the chickens that was clearly one sided because, much to my disappointment, they still have no idea who I am. I am intrigued by their way of simple living; how little they needed to provide humans with so many of our necessities. I grew up in a city and have never felt particularly connected to nature, nor have I really felt the need to be. That is, until I met these chickens, and for some reason, they sparked my curiosity. I want to know everything I can about them; where they come from, what goes into laying an egg, and what it means to be a chicken. I recently purchased six baby chicks to keep in my room and to mother into adulthood. The purpose is to not only be responsible for these incredibly fragile animals, but to be the primary caregiver for these creatures that will eventually provide eggs, meat and protein for the community. Chickens are also amazing creatures because they pay for themselves. They lay eggs and will eventually be meat, which saves the money that you would be spending on grocery store eggs and meat, and in return we (humans) buy them food and make sure that they are happy and healthy. They do not require much work, and the overall benefit is worth it.

As I thought about the chickens we keep at my school and my new baby chicks, what they eat and how they were raised, I began to think about the chicken that I buy in the supermarket or the chicken you can get at Burger King or McDonalds. How are those chickens raised? I am interested in examining the overall cost of commercially produced meat and crops versus the price of eating organically. Chicks raised organically are not only better for the consumer, but also the earth. When commercial companies raise animals in harsh conditions and in bulk in order to produce more meat and eggs faster and for less money, they are negatively affecting both the environment and the consumer. In *Eating Animals*, Jonathan Safran Foer writes, "Our response to the factory farm is ultimately a test of how we respond to the powerless, to the most distant, to the voiceless - it is a test of how we act when no one is forcing us to act one way or another. Consistency is not required, but engagement with the problem is."¹ Humans are ignoring a problem that is incredibly dangerous to our health and the environments well being. It is an incredible waste to keep chickens, which can do so much for the earth, in a big dark building just eating and growing and eventually laying eggs, when they could be picking through the grass.

The only problem with the chickens picking through grass at factory farms is that what little grass that is at the farm is treated with toxic chemicals that are very bad for them to eat. In terms of plants, commercial farming is terrible for our planet because of all of the pesticides used when growing crops. This, again, is a tactic used to produce crops faster and cheaper, but we, the world, are not taking into account what is wrong with this picture. Growing things faster than their natural development is not good for the plant or the consumer because they have either been genetically modified or have been through chemical processes that accelerates their growth. This then makes them unnatural, and we are not only losing our connection with nature, but we are also not utilizing a product that is better for you than the product being sold at the grocery store. In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollen writes, "Imagine if we had a food system that actually produced wholesome food. Imagine if it produced that food in a way that restored the land. Imagine if we could eat every meal knowing these few simple things: What it is we're

eating. Where it came from. How it found its way to our table. And what it really cost. If that was the reality, then every meal would have the potential to be a perfect meal. We would not need to go hunting for our connection to our food and the web of life that produces it. We would no longer need any reminding that we eat by the grace of nature, not industry, and that what we're eating is never anything more or less than the body of the world. I don't want to have to forage every meal. Most people don't want to learn to garden or hunt. But we can change the way we make and get our food so that it becomes food again—something that feeds our bodies and our souls. Imagine it: Every meal would connect us to the joy of living and the wonder of nature. Every meal would be like saying grace.”ⁱⁱ Why are we doing this? Why do we humans insist on eating food that is horrible for us, our economy and or environment?

Efficiency is a major reason, but it is not the only one. Price is also a very big drive. “The ninety-nine cent price of a fast-food hamburger simply doesn't take account of that meal's true cost—to soil, oil, public health, the public purse, etc., costs which are never charged directly to the consumer but, indirectly and invisibly, to the taxpayer (in the form of subsidies), the health care system (in the form of food-borne illnesses and obesity), and the environment (in the form of pollution), not to mention the welfare of the workers in the feedlot and the slaughterhouse and the welfare of the animals themselves.”ⁱⁱⁱ The price of locally grown produce is much more expensive than the cheeseburger you can get at McDonalds. This price gap is done on purpose. Manufactures and major corporations know that convenience will get them the most profit. They made themselves convenient by creating drive-thru's, *fast* food, and doing it for an incredibly low price (for both the consumer and producer). “Fast food is popular because it's convenient, it's cheap, and it tastes good. But the real cost of eating fast food never appears on the menu.”^{iv} On the other hand, it is incredibly inconvenient for a typical lower-middle class citizen to pay more than they usually would on food on locally grown produce, and to prepare it into a meal. We are a new generation and our most prominent characteristic is our laziness. In *The American Way of Eating*, Tracie McMillan states, “Box meals don't save us time any more than going out to eat does, and they don't even save us money. What they do instead is remove the need to have to come up with a plan for dinner, something that's easy when you're a skilled cook—and bafflingly difficult when you're not. The real convenience behind these convenience foods isn't time or money, but that they remove one more bit of stress from our day....”^v Not buying local produce because it is too labor intensive to cook and make a meal out of is the perfect example of this.

The fast food industry is causing America extreme issues nutritionally, environmentally, and economically. “In 2000 the UN reported that the number of people in the world suffering from over nutrition—a billion—exceeded for the first time in history the number suffering from under nutrition—800 million. The great food problem of our time is that there is too much of it, not too little.”^{vi} Obesity is an epidemic that has been on the rise all over the world, and especially in America, and is nowhere close to coming to an end. There are many reasons for this issue, two major ones being the insufficient income problem in the United States and the ingredients that go into the food we are eating. Nutritionally, the source of most of obesity and heart disease can be linked back to corn. Corn is the primary food that our meat eats for a few reasons. It is incredibly cheap to keep the crop growing, and you can grow it in unbelievable masses. If you look at the label on most of your processed foods, you will find corn, or corn related products. A Big Mac at McDonalds is 52% corn and a McCafe Milkshake is 78% corn.^{vii} The price of a Big Mac in the US is \$3.99, but the overall cost of it is much more. The health cost of fast food is Obesity, Type 2 Diabetes, and chronic disease.^{viii} Who is letting this happen? The government. “Today the U.S. government can demand the nation-wide recall of defective softball bats, sneakers, stuffed

animals, and foam-rubber toy cows. But it cannot order a meatpacking company to remove contaminated, potentially lethal ground beef from fast food kitchens and supermarket shelves.”^{ix} The government is pouring billions of dollars into the production of corn and soybeans, which is used to feed the food that we eat, and that goes directly into the cheap products that we are buying.^x

The largest fast food chain in the world is McDonalds, with KFC being a close runner up. McDonalds employs 1.9 million people all over the world and the average employee earns about \$15,570 per year (\$8.81 an hour).^{xi} Due to this low income these workers are not getting a proper diet, and choosing the cheapest and most convenient food, which is most likely McDonalds or another fast food chain. The number of McDonalds employees is nothing compared to the astounding 69 million people who are eating their food a day (more than the entire population of the UK).

The corn we are getting through the meat we are eating is just as bad for the animal as it is for us. Healthy animals should be eating grass and natural, living organisms for their protein rather than corn feed. “Corn is what feeds the steer that becomes the steak. Corn feeds the chicken and the pig, the turkey, and the lamb, the catfish and the tilapia and, increasingly, even the salmon, a carnivore by nature that the fish farmers are reengineering to tolerate corn. The eggs are made of corn. The milk and cheese and yogurt, which once came from dairy cows that grazed on grass, now typically comes from Holsteins that spend their working lives indoors tethered to machines, eating corn.”^{xii} It is not only better for the earth for our meat to be eating living things, but is also better for us. In addition to that, the animals that we are buying at grocery stores and fast food restaurants are given antibiotics to fight diseases and remove the things in cow manure that are not good for the grass. “*Escherichia colia O157:H7* is a relatively new strain of the common intestinal bacteria (no one had seen it before 1980) that thrives in feedlot cattle, 40 percent of which carry it in their gut. Ingesting as few as ten of these microbes can cause a fatal infection; they produce a toxin that destroys human kidneys.”^{xiii} Factory farming is not only bad for humans nutritionally, but it is also a form of animal cruelty. Chickens, for example, are kept in windowless, dirty and crowded shelters. Many of these animals will die of diseases or be crushed from overcrowding before even reaching their intended time of death. The chickens are fattened up with corn and antibiotics as quickly as possible to maximize their weight for meat and egg production. When the chickens stop laying eggs, they are stuffed into fairly small cages and shipped to a slaughterhouse. Because these animals are being raised to be fatter than they would be naturally, and cost such a low amount of money, their meat is worth much less. McDonalds can sell their meat for such low prices because their animals cost very little. When the animals are being slaughtered in factory farms, the plants are incredibly unsanitary, and let off an overwhelming amount of pollution into the atmosphere, contributing greatly to global warming.

Fast food is not only bad for human and animal health; it is also bad for the health of our environment. Industrial farming is incredibly dangerous to our earth because of pesticides used on the plants that we buy at the grocery store or at fast food restaurants, or they are GMO’s. A GMO is a genetically modified organism, which means that the plant has been altered in a food lab to have a resistance to a crop infestation or to be a more desirable product. The root of most of the issues with planetary health begins with chemical fertilizer. After World War II, America had an astounding amount of aluminum nitrate, the main component in explosives, left over so they made it into fertilizer and spread it over the farmlands, which caused an unnatural growth spurt in the crops.^{xiv} They grew stronger and faster, and by doing so changed farming in America

completely. Corporations began to realize that they could increase their production rate very cheaply and with little work. Similarly, pesticides originated from poisons chemicals left over from the war.^{xv} By creating this fertilizer that accelerates the growth of corn, it is removing much of labor intensive and time-consuming factors a farmer must consider. Another thing to consider when discussing pesticides is the inevitability of evolution. If a bug is infecting an entire crop of corn that stretches for hundreds of acres, and the bugs become resistant to the pesticides that are already on the plant, the plants will be treated with a new updated version. When the next bug becomes resistant to that pesticide, they will be sprayed with a new pesticide, and the cycle continues. This means that we, and the animals we are eating are consuming a lot of chemicals that are terrible for us. “A nationwide study published by the USDA in 1996 found that [...] 78.6 percent of the ground beef contained microbes that are spread primarily by fecal matter. The medical literature on the causes of food poisoning is full of euphemisms and dry scientific terms: coliform levels, aerobic plate counts, sorbitol, MacConkey agar, and so on. Behind them lies a simple explanation for why eating hamburger meat makes you sick: There is shit in the meat.”^{xvi} Not only are these chemicals directly affecting us, they are also a huge contributor to global warming. When a rainstorm comes through, the chemicals in the fertilizers are washed away into the drainage system. This water goes into our oceans and pollutes the water that we are drinking and showering in.

Buying cheaper goods from Wal-Mart and McDonalds is bad for our economy because the money you are spending goes back to the company, whereas if you were to buy from local markets, hardware stores, coffee shops, etc., your money will stay local and profit the economy. When Wal-Mart comes into small towns, they put all of the mom-and-pop establishments out of business, which leaves more people without job and Wal-Mart as “top dog” with no competition. Wal-Mart recommends their employees to seek out food stamps and Government subsidized healthcare because they do not want to pay for it and they want to pay them the lowest salary they can.^{xvii} Wal-Mart Inc. has a gross income of 120.57 billion dollars, yet they pay their workers just over minimum wage.^{xviii} Employees have to work full time plus overtime just to bring home enough to feed their families. This is even more twisted because if they are working full time plus overtime, they barely have time to see their families. Where is all of Wal-Mart’s money going?

Buying from local mom and pop businesses, produce stands, farmers markets, basically anything other than major corporations like Wal-Mart and fast food chains like McDonalds and KFC will benefit our economy. This is much easier said than done because good food is more expensive. It takes more time and money to produce plants and raise animals organically, but the price and the cost equal out. In *Folks, This Ain’t Normal; You Can Farm*, Joel Salatin poses that “This magical, marvelous food on our plate, this sustenance we absorb, has a story to tell. It has a journey. It leaves a footprint. It leaves a legacy. To eat with reckless abandon, without conscience, without knowledge; folks, this ain’t normal.”^{xix}

Our environment, nutritional issues, and economical situation are all deeply intertwined and we can chalk a lot of it up to the fast food industry and major corporations like Wal-Mart. If McDonalds and Wal-Mart are demanding their products to produce faster and cheaper, they will get it because they have all of the power. If a farm does not cooperate, those companies can take their business elsewhere without thinking twice, and that farm goes bankrupt. If they do cooperate, then the farm needs to keep up with the demands being made, and make their crops grow faster and stronger, their animals grow faster and bigger, and do it all with the littlest amount of money. Corn is produced faster and cheaper than ever and can be passed off as “food”

for the animals. The farms keep as many chickens or cows (or whatever meat they are raising) in dirty confined spaces where they can barely turn around or sit down. The first time those chickens will see natural light will be on the way to their slaughter. From there, they are butchered and processed into patties or into nuggets until there is very little left of them. From there, they are sent to the Wal-Mart and McDonalds that have come into small towns and put all of the local businesses out of business. Those homegrown places where the locals used to live are gone, so they resort to McDonald's for their dinner and Wal-Mart just about everything else. The people working for those major companies are getting paid very little, so they are either bringing home fast food to feed their families or the cheapest items they can find in the grocery section of Wal-Mart. Herein lies the essential question: Can we afford the true cost food?

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