

FOOD FOR THOUGHT



I'm bored with most of the arguments still going on about climate change. How much is down to man and how much to solar cycles is somewhat academic. The question is what are we going to do about the crises that are already in the pipeline? We have to look at exciting solutions rather than terrifying prospects.

I was reminded of this when we recently signed up to a veggie-box scheme for local, organic vegetables. It was with a mixture of excitement and nostalgia that I unpacked the box. It took me back to the days, 30 years ago, that we ran a local food co-op from the garage at the bottom of our garden.

Now it is much more sophisticated and professional, but the principle is the same: local food systems can offer you fresher food and a wider choice of varieties, in a deal that is better for the public, the farmer

and the planet. Elsewhere in Europe, people take the existence of local food systems as a civic right rather than an exception.

The 'Slow Food' movement is built on the promotion of local and regional food markets. It promotes the availability of fresh food, low 'food miles' and strong lines of accountability directly between the farm and the family. In Italy, where it all started, they also argue that even the poor have a better diet than the middle classes in Britain.

Two things will force us to reconnect to these traditions - which were also our own - of local food systems. The first is water, the second, oil.

Climate change is already disrupting the seasons. You can have a drought, then flash flooding in the same month. Some of the main food producing areas in the world are already in their fifth year of drought. Before long they will face choices between water for themselves and water for export goods. No prizes for guessing which they will choose. Global food trade will come second to local food security. Countries will have to ask how they meet their own food security needs. And so will the UK. That part of the East Midlands that is not lost to rising sea levels, will have to do what Tuscany is already doing - conduct annual audits of how it manages its rainfall and water use. It is here that local food systems come into their own.

Oil comes into the equation at this point; not as global transport costs, but in the cost of fertilisers and the like. Over 95% of agro-chemicals are oil based. As oil prices spiral, so too will the forms of agriculture (monoculture) that depend on intensive use of fertilisers.

In the last year Cuba has become entirely self sufficient in food that is grown organically. They had no oil, so had no choice. But they have shown how it can be done. Much of this know-how lies within our own traditions too. But it means a return to living more consistently with the seasonality of what the land offers. It means re-connecting with sustainable water use. And it means shifting food subsidies

from huge landowners (or overproduction) to rotational farming systems that put back into the earth as much as they take out.

The excitement of this is not to be found in another co-op in my garage. It is to be found in internationalised Slow Food movements that re-build local food systems. The public get better food, farmers get better farming, and the planet will get some breathing space.

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