

Problems with cheap food



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Food fight: Worldviews on food production and consumption

Cheap Food Is Simply Unaffordable

During the past few decades, the Food industry's productivity levels have skyrocketed and our food system is now able to produce large quantities of food in very short time spans. Furthermore, these products are sold at extremely low prices in order to attract consumers. At first glance this seems like an ideal food system but unfortunately things aren't as they seem.

Producing unlimited amounts of cheap, processed food actually costs a lot of energy and has harmful effects on the environment, animals and our own health . Therefore, finding new sustainable ways of producing food remains crucial.

First of all it is important to understand how the food industry manages to sell its products at such an irresistible price. The reason is simple. All large food companies have one single goal : maximizing their profit. In order to do so, they want to make sure that they produce and sell as much as possible in a very short period of time. In order to increase their yield companies use advanced technology and an alarming amounts of resources such as pesticides, herbicides, fossil fuel and corn. In particular corn is of great importance, it is used as a preserving agent and also as food to cattle. More than 12 billion b. u of corn are produced annually(1). Furthermore, with fossil fuel levels running low, corn is turned into ethanol and later used as fuel. The food companies can sell us their products at such cheap prices because the corn that they buy and use doesn't cost them a thing. The price of corn is

being maintained at low levels in an artificial way. Over the past decade the US Federal Government has spent more than 50 billion dollars into the corn industry(2). This is the why unprocessed organic foods are so much more expensive. A study in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition found that a dollar could buy 1200 calories of potato chips or 875 calories of soda but just 250 calories of vegetables or 170 calories of fresh fruit (3). In a few words, the large food companies have been receiving financial support by the government. No wonder unprocessed foods are much more expensive and unaffordable. They haven't been receiving any "royal" treatment.

One of the main flaws of our food production system is that it is very energy-intensive. The food industry is heavily dependent on the use of oil and fossil fuels. In order to increase their output food industries use diesel powered tractors, irrigation pumps, pesticides and herbicides made of natural gas and petroleum. In fact, in the U. S about 10 percent of the energy budget goes to producing, distributing, processing, preparing and preserving the plant and animal matter we consume (4). However, the amount of food that is produced is much smaller than the amount of energy used to produce it. For instance, the U. S expends roughly ten units of fossil energy to produce one unit of food energy (5). Thus, if companies are already producing large amounts of food an unimaginable amount of energy is used to make it. It seems that the large food companies are ignoring the energy crisis we are in. For decades industries have been exploiting Earth's natural resources as if these resources were to last forever and the food industry has been no exception. Considering the fact that the global population is increasing and that we are running out of fossil fuels we will no longer be able to satisfy the

increasing demand. The demand for meat and poultry is expected to increase by 25 percent by 2015 (6). In addition, the price of oil and other fossil fuels will also increase. Hence, the current food production system is unsustainable and will eventually collapse.

Not only is our current food system very energy demanding but it also damages our ecosystems and harms animals. As one of the main energy consumers the food industry is also one of the major water, air and soil polluters. Burning fossil fuels create greenhouse gases which contribute to global warming. Intensive farming requires large amounts of chemical fertilizers. In American farms more than 10 million tons of fertilizers are being used for corn alone. 23 million for all crops (7). All these chemicals end up in rivers, lakes or in seas contributing to water pollution, soil contamination and in what we call "dead zones". "Dead Zones" are areas of approximately 6000 -sq-mi area which contain no oxygen, killing all forms of sea life. There are nearly 400 dead zones and these dead zones cause the fishing industry to lose 212 000 tons of seafood a year (8). But our food system does not only pollute our land by releasing chemicals. Our ecosystem is also affected by the large amount of manure our system releases. One pig can produce four times more waste than humans (9). Considering the number of pigs and other livestock we can definitely say that a tremendous amount of waste is produced. All of this waste is thrown into giant pits called lagoons. These lagoons contain so much waste that they become toxic and they are one of the main causes of pollution in the United States (10). They also pollute the land with heavy metals like cadmium, selenium, zinc, copper and arsenic(11). Furthermore, industrial agriculture also contributes in soil

erosion and the loss of biodiversity. Monoculture crops are vast spaces of land where only one type of plant grows. These crops create an ecological vacuum that insects take advantage which reduces the quality of soil (12). These crops also reduce biodiversity which damages the food chain. But the degradation of animal life doesn't end there. Because the food industry wants to make us much profit as possible thousands of animals are crammed together in small contracted areas where they never get to see sunlight. Apparently, for large companies animal welfare and our environment are much less important than making profit.

Most importantly cheap food has also affected consumer's health in a variety of negative ways . Processed foods are low in nutrients, high in salt, sugar and fat. Moreover, three-fourth of the world food sales involve processed foods which means cheap food has reached almost every country. Different studies have shown that there is a strong correlation between consuming cheap foods and the chances of developing different types of diseases. Since the late 1970s, obesity rates have more than doubled among children 6 to 11 of age and more than tripled among those 12 to 19 of age (13). Products like SSBs (sugar sweetened beverages) are major contributors to childhood obesity, as well as to long term weight gain, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases (14). Furthermore, the chemicals and hormones that are added in our food also cause health issues. Danish Scientists have proven that hormone residues in beef are linked to high rates of breast and prostate cancer, as well as early onset puberty in girls(15). Moreover, all the waste and pollution that is caused by our food production system doesn't only affect animals but it affects our health as well. For instance, livestock

manure pollutes the air with hydrogen sulphide which is linked to respiratory and neurological diseases (16). Hence, cheap food comes with very high costs to our health.

Our current food system has many drawbacks, therefore it is important that we find new sustainable ways of producing food. First of all we possess technology that could decrease pollution and spare resources. Anaerobic digesters and micro turbines can convert manure into renewable, low-carbon biogas-fired electricity. Carbon dioxide could be used to grow algae for food and algae could easily be converted into bio-fuels. In addition, drip irrigation seems promising. Drip irrigation consists of underground tubes that deliver water directly to a plant's roots. Researchers at Iowa State University estimate that corn farmers would use 40 percent less water and lower their energy bills by 15 percent with drip irrigation (17). No-till agriculture is yet another promising option. This method involves planting seeds without turning the soil which reduces soil disturbance. Argentina already uses this advanced technique for more than half of its farms. Even though these methods are very helpful there is a lot more to be done. For the past decades large food companies have driven farmers off the land. In fact, nine out of ten hog farmers have left the business since 1979 (18). With unemployment levels getting higher by the day returning to the old way of farming might be a solution. Although it may seem that local farmers don't stand a chance towards the large food companies that is not necessarily true. If we support local farmers and the local food movement we are playing our part into stopping the food industry's harmful practices. Furthermore, companies like Niman Ranch have created networks of small scale farmers

who only sale natural meat to restaurants (19). Other companies like " Bon Appetit" encourage their costumers to make environmental friendly choices. Our behavior as consumers also has a large impact on the energy ratio. Even though we might not realize it, our every day choices do have an influence on the amount of energy that is being used. Our diets one of them. If we eat meat every single day the amount of fossil fuels used is a lot greater than if we ate grain everyday. Meat is four times as energy demanding as grains are. That doesn't necessarily mean that we should eat grains everyday but reducing our meat consumption and eating more foods that are less energy demanding does have a large impact. Restaurant owners might decide to sell in smaller proportions and keep the leftovers. Moreover, maybe we should think twice before going to eat at buffets. As consumers we should also think about not wasting our own food and not buying more than we need. The USDA estimates that Americans throw out 14 percent of the food that they buy which results in the waste of large amounts of resources (20). Thus our decisions as consumers can have large impacts on the food system.

In conclusion, our society simply cannot afford cheap food. Our current food production system is not only highly inefficient but also harms our planet, animals and our own health. Fortunately for us it is not too late to change things. The use of modern technology to manage waste, supporting local farmers and Eco-friendly products are only some of the few ways to create a new sustainable way of producing food.

References

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