

ORGANIC FOOD AND GREEN VALUES: AN EDUCATED CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

Interest in organic food is developing slowly in New Zealand, gradually attracting attention from the general public. With just 1.16% of agricultural land in organic production, it is misleading for New Zealand to market itself as 100% pure, and then expect international tourists to eat chemically enhanced food. This study of motives for eating organic food is based on data collected in Scotland and California, where surveys and interviews were undertaken with 30 participants who choose to eat organic food. Preliminary results indicate that organic food choices are strongly related to being well educated, and motives are primarily around environmental concerns and personal health. Motives for ethical purchasing choices are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand is slow to join the trend for eating organic food. There are fewer than 1400 organic farmers, a scarcity of dedicated organic supermarkets, and common products such as organic coffee can be difficult to find away from main centre cafés. Furthermore, prices are high. In September 2013, organic milk cost a \$1.15 a litre more than conventional milk, apples cost \$1.00 more a kilogram, and organic eggs were \$3.30 more than free range eggs for a box of ten. New Zealand's marketing image as 100% pure is inconsistent with growing fruit and vegetables with synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, or taking tourists to rivers and lakes polluted with nitrates and phosphates from conventional farming methods.

Food safety campaigner Sue Kedgley (2006) pointed out that only 0.24% of New Zealand's agricultural land was in organic production in 2005, significantly less than in countries such as Sweden, Germany and Austria. She criticised the lack of government support for organic farming, which has resulted in the limited availability and high prices associated with organic food. Now, seven years later, New Zealand has 1.16% of land in organic production, compared to nearly 20% for Austria, 15.4% for Sweden, and nearly 4% for the United Kingdom. Switzerland and Denmark have the highest spending per capita, Australia has the most land in organic production, and ten countries have more than ten per cent of land in organic production. In the United States of America (USA), just 0.6% of land is in organic production, although it has the greatest demand for organic food globally (Table 1) (FiBL and iFOAM, 2013).

Comparative global markets for organic food				
Country	Hectares in organic production	Percent of agricultural land	Producers	Sales (Euros, millions)
Australia (2009)	12,001,724	2.93%	2,129	942
Canada	841,216	1.24%	3,718	1,904
Germany	1,015,626	6.08%	22,506	6,590
New Zealand	133,321	1.16%	1,365	205
United Kingdom	638,528	3.96%	4,650	1,882
USA (2008)	1,948,946	0.60%	12,941	21,038

Table 1: Comparative global markets for organic food*

*2011 unless otherwise stated

Possible reasons for local market resistance may be that New Zealanders consider their food is already clean and healthy, so they need not eat organically, or perhaps the price premium of eating organically is too high. Resistance to putting more land into organic production may arise from the strong-hold of the New Zealand agricultural sector, which leads the export market with conventionally produced dairy products and meat.

A New Zealand study of organic dining found that while many restaurateurs are motivated by green values, these are not a pre-requisite for entering the organic sector (Poulston & Liu, 2011). It is therefore important to discover why people eat organic food, so their motivations can be shared with others, in the hope of influencing growth in organic markets generally. Identifying the reasons for eating organic food may also identify the benefits of organic food consumption and help future researchers understand more about organic consumers, so research can be targeted at improving supply to meet their needs. This study therefore particularly examines the motives for eating organic food, as well as some of the benefits.

METHODS

As organic food is considered a luxury item by some, and a green value by others, this study has been undertaken in two disparate economic regions: Findhorn in Scotland, and Encinitas in California. Findhorn has attracted those interested in organic food since 1966, when the Findhorn community dedicated itself to working harmoniously with nature to grow its own food (Ecovillage, 2013). To the contrary, Encinitas is a wealthy community in California, with an average income one and a half times the USA average (Sperling, 2013). Whereas Findhorn has a small and expensive organic grocery store, Encinitas has a large supermarket in the main centre selling organic and ethical products almost exclusively. The Findhorn and Encinitas communities provide comparative data that identify a range of motives in terms of green values and luxury choices.

Grounded theory was used as the methodological basis for recruitment, data collection and analysis, as there was no hypothesis to test, and theoretical work on green values is still sparse (Pernecky & Johnston, 2006).

Shoppers at cafés, farmers' markets and organic supermarkets were surveyed on the types of foods they eat, perspectives on other foods, and their reasons for choosing (or not) organic food. Using the grounded theory approach, face-to-face unstructured interviews probed beliefs about organic foods. Although notes were taken, conversations were digitally recorded for transcribing later. Consistent

with the grounded theory approach, themes that emerged in the early interviews and surveys were used to inform subsequent questions for interviews.

Thirty participants were surveyed, 26 of whom were in or from Scotland. Of these, 13 were also interviewed. This paper primarily overviews the survey results, as interview data are still being transcribed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Only six participants did not have a university degree, indicating that the choice to eat organic food is strongly related to being well educated. The commitment to organic food ranged from mild preferences to eating organic food exclusively (three participants).

The real costs of eating organic food

When asked if they would still buy organic food if it doubled in price, 36% of participants said they would. Sacrifices for their commitment to eat organic foods included the extra efforts and travel to find products (n = 5), growing their own (n = 5), and going without luxury items such as new clothes, cinema, and holidays (n = 5).

Twelve participants said eating organic food did not require any special efforts or sacrifices. To test this idea, the researcher attempted to eat only organic food during the three-week period of fieldwork. This required extra travel and effort to find products, paying a price premium and therefore having to reduce other costs, and eating a limited range of foods, especially in Scotland (products such as ice-cream cones were available in the USA, but not seen in Scotland). In Scotland it was difficult to find good vegetables, and eventually these were sourced from a neighbouring domestic gardener. As snacks and meals prepared by others when dining out, it was not possible to eat only organic foods and maintain a conventional professional and social demeanour. Eating organically meant eating alone, excluding most cheeses, fast and junk foods, alcohol, cakes, and having a limited choice of all foods (e.g. breakfast cereals, teas, and snacks). It was necessary to pack a lunch most days, as very few cafes had organic choices, and keeping to an organics-only regime while travelling was almost impossible, as airlines, airport lounges and petrol stations did not have organic meals.

Reasons for eating organic food

An overwhelming majority of participants cited environmental and political reasons for their organic food choices. Many chose to support small farmers rather than the big consortia, and there was a strong dislike of the British supermarket chain Tesco. In the USA, participants were particularly concerned about genetically modified foods, and it was several days before the researcher realised that some organic foods was also genetically modified (GM), and labels had to be carefully scrutinised to avoid these.

Several participants spoke of not wanting to 'be owned or served by the corporate world', or not wanting to 'rape the world'. The organic food preference was therefore related to a preference for avoiding GM and mass-produced foods, and many participants also sought out free-range eggs and meats, and tried to buy locally. The choice to eat organically was therefore strongly political and environmental.

Organic products help small businesses rather than multinationals and they are better for the environment (OF1)

Whatever we do does have political effect... what we don't buy... has a political effect (OF1).

Organics is wider than just food - it is a movement (OF9).

Participants were particularly concerned about the toxins, hormones and pesticides going into their own bodies, and into the environment.

Less pesticides and toxins... going into my body (OF2).

There is already so much pollution in the environment and with the (non-organic) food that we eat, we increase that (OF3).

Toxins, pesticides, harmful microorganisms, they create acidity in the body. Within an acidic body, degenerative diseases thrive (OF3).

Some believed that conventionally produced foods avoid the ethical costs of food production, such as using fair trade policies, supporting small communities, and sustainable farming practices.

Crap food that is normally available actually has a lot of hidden costs in it that aren't represented in the price (OF4).

Many said organic food tastes better and has more vitality, and several recommended organic strawberries as particularly tasty, as they were not waterlogged.

CONCLUSION

Preserving the environment for future generations, the belief that organic food is healthier, and the high education levels of those who eat organic foods are the most important findings to date. Interview data are expected to provide the benefits of eating organic food, the attitudes and beliefs that accompany a commitment to eating organic food, and an in-depth understanding of how organic foods are perceived. For example, as half those surveyed agreed that organic food 'vibrates' differently to conventionally produced foods, data have provided an interesting area for further research into what this means, and how it is experienced.

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