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“Buy Locally”—Horse and Buggy Advice from the Green Movement

By Steve Goreham

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“Buy locally” is among the most foolish edicts in the long list of commandments from today’s environmental movement. Local sourcing is proposed by our universities as the solution for saving the rain forests, reducing pollution, and halting global warming. We’d expect such advice from an out-of-touch grandparent, but not our intellectual leaders.

The website of the Sierra Club [tells](#) us, “...we need to start producing and using products, from our food to our energy, closer to home. Sadly, the current trend is to produce goods wherever labor is cheapest and environmental protections are lowest and ship them across the world.” The global explosion in world trade has been bad for the buy locally movement.

Earlier this month I attended climate change lectures at the University of Chicago and Wheaton College. Local sourcing was a touted solution to environmental ills. At Wheaton, a visiting professor from Scotland proposed that global warming could be stopped if people sourced food, energy, and other life essentials locally. He failed to offer advice on the sustainability of airplane flights from Scotland to Chicago.

The State of Michigan imports most of its oil, coal, and natural gas. Should Michigan citizens revert to burning locally-sourced wood for their energy needs as Americans did in the 1800s? In December, New York [banned](#) hydraulic fracturing to recover natural gas, despite the fact that the state [produces](#) 47 percent of its electricity from natural gas and imports most of its gas from other states.

Illinois imports all of its coffee. Should citizens of Illinois switch to growing coffee locally in greenhouses? Coffee farming in Illinois might be better than mango farming in Minnesota, but neither makes economic sense. Foods are sourced from distant locations where production costs are lower. Lower production costs generally mean higher yields, and reduced land, fertilizer, and pesticide usage. Cultivation of less land saves more land for nature.

Why do decrees from environmentalists always seem to come from the Dark Ages? Buy locally, eat organically-grown food, avoid genetically modified organism (GMO) hybrids from modern biotechnology, use renewable energy, get off the electrical grid, and ride bicycles to save the planet.

Two hundred years ago, most people grew their own food or made their own clothes. Every farm spread animal manure and practiced organic farming. Prior to modern fertilizers, pesticides, and genetically-modified hybrids, agricultural yields were poor. Today's environmental movement pushes for a return to the good old days of poor-yield pre-industrial agriculture.

At the University of Chicago [lecture](#), I sat next to a pair of environmentally-minded attendees. They were concerned that today's forestry companies plant only a single type of tree over huge areas, spoiling the ecological diversity of the forest. But foresters specialize in the production of a few types of trees to maximize wood harvest per acre, thereby reducing the number of acres that need to be harvested.

We live in an age of specialization of labor. An engineer writes software and sells his service so that he doesn't need to grow his own food and make his own clothes. As author Matt Ridley [points](#) out, the magic of modern society is that everybody is working for everybody else. We each have thousands of people across the world making goods and services for us. Buying locally and producing your own goods are relics of the past.

Environmental groups promote windmills for large-scale electricity production, a technology used in the 1800s for pumping water and grinding grain. In 2013, the 46,000 wind turbines [operating](#) in the US covered an area larger than the state of Maryland, but provided only 4.5 percent of the nation's electricity. Wind energy is only competitive with large-scale subsidies from local or national governments. When the federal Production Tax Credit was cancelled in 2014, US wind installations dropped 90 per cent from 2013.

Today it's fashionably green to go "off-grid" for your electricity needs. But electricity is the foundation of modern society and separates developed and developing nations. Today's environmental movement demands that everyone reduce electricity consumption to reduce global warming and save the climate. In March we enjoyed Earth Hour, when citizens were urged to turn off their lights around the world. Last week was Dark Sky Week, an [effort](#) to make citizens aware of "light pollution." It's always Dark Sky Week in Africa, where the majority of a billion people don't have access to electricity.



Ethanol and biodiesel vehicle fuels are “renewable,” and promoted by the European Union and the Environmental Protection Agency to reduce petroleum-based vehicle fuel and fight global warming. But in 2013, more than 40 percent of the US corn crop produced ethanol for only 7 percent of US vehicle fuel. Nine bushels of corn are needed to [provide](#) ethanol for one 25 gallon tank of E85 fuel for a Sport Utility Vehicle. Biofuels require huge amounts of land for little energy output.

Environmental groups have it exactly wrong. The best way to protect the environment is to use modern high-density fuels and to practice high-yield agriculture in the lowest cost location, rather than forced local sourcing. Suppose we embrace modern solutions to world problems and avoid horse and buggy remedies from the past?

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