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This article is the fifth in a [six-part series](#) focused on helping consumers choose products that align with their values.

Where did this come from? The origin of a product, or provenance, used to be the first question that consumers asked. Shoppers used to know which dairy produced their milk and which farmer grew their vegetables. But in the complicated world of modern marketing, food and other products carry so many labels it's hard to know which ones to care about.

A recent [consumer survey](#) indicates that Americans think "locally sourced," "small business/locally owned," and "made in America" are "somewhat important" when shopping. As long as manufacturers hide that information in obscure labeling and reports not available to the shopper, it will be difficult to act on the desire to find locally grown food and products made close to your home.

Local for Climate Change

Climate change is the most important environmental issue facing the world today. From a climate-change standpoint, consumers' middling concern for provenance might be appropriate.

Even though we often discuss carbon emissions in terms of vehicle miles, transporting food is a relatively small portion of its climate impact. A [2008 life cycle analysis](#) by Carnegie Mellon University researchers found that transporting food to market generated only 4 percent of food's climate impact.

According to a [recent study](#) of American diets, the environmental impact of meat production (particularly beef) dwarfs all other food-related factors. This illustrates how making smart choices can have a positive impact on the planet: if climate change is your only motivation for buying local food, you can eat all the South American produce you want if you quit eating meat.

But you need the information to make the decision, so look carefully at what you eat and not only where it comes from.

Local Products for the Local Environment

The low impact of transportation on food-based carbon emissions doesn't mean that there is no [environmental benefit](#) to locally produced food. Small farmers are more likely to support biodiversity by planting a variety of crops and to adopt environmentally friendly practices like using soil-enhancing cover crops, creating wildlife border areas, and using fewer pesticides.

Local food also keeps nutrient cycling at the local level, while conventional agriculture can upset a region's natural nutrient balance by exporting all those materials.

There are also social and economic benefits to supporting local farms, not least of which is [food security](#). Money spent on locally produced goods stays in the community. Nearly 32 jobs are created for every \$1 million in revenue generated by [produce farms](#) involved in direct marketing, such as farmers markets or [CSAs](#), compared to only 10.5 jobs for wholesale-only farms.

Defining Local

One of the difficulties in quantifying the impacts of shopping locally is that the [definition of local can vary](#) dramatically. Political boundaries have very little relevance to environmental impact or even distance traveled, but you hear "Buy American" or "Buy British" in many debates about locally sourced products.

Consider the size difference between Texas and Rhode Island. Round numbers are attractive — hence the popularity of the [100-mile diet](#) — but may not be practical or reflect environmental impact accurately. Local food makes the most sense when defined in terms of ecology. Local then means production is kept within a basic eco-region defined by climate and natural resources.

These guidelines do not apply to manufactured products, like a dishwasher or car. Unlike food, many modern manufactured products contain so many materials that it would be impossible for any eco-region to produce them.

When shopping for non-food goods, a [distributed manufacturing](#) model might be the best approximation of "local." These systems complete final assembly using standardized parts as close as possible to the customer. The current economic upheavals caused by trade wars may bring more final assembly of products, with significantly greater product customization, to many regions.

Local Labels

Although most of the shopping local discussion revolves around food, there are no legally defined labels for local food.

The Federal Trade Commission does have [standards](#) for manufactured products labeled "Made in USA." Though the label implies higher quality products made to higher standards of worker and environmental protection, it only guarantees the origin of the product. In many cases, it may simply be capitalizing on [nationalistic](#) sentiment with no improvement in production methods.

Even the greenhouse gas production associated with transportation may not be lower for domestically-made products; not only are some parts of the U.S. closer to Canada or Central America than they are to other states, but the relative environmental [impacts of various shipping methods](#) are hard to quantify.

Shopping Local

Buying local can be simultaneously the simplest and the most challenging way to shop your values. There is a straightforward satisfaction in knowing where your stuff comes from.

But understanding provenance comes with a sometimes prohibitive price tag. Too often, local goods are not even available. The origin of the products that are available is often obscure, and the method of delivery is rarely known. Even though freight movement, which also includes air- and water-based transport, currently accounts for [16 percent](#) of all corporate greenhouse gas emissions, consumers have little direct impact on the industry. You can ask for better by demanding companies share your environmental values, and all freight modes have room for environmental improvement.

Signs indicate that purchasing food and products as close to the source as possible is the best practice. But when it comes to maximizing the environmental impact of our consumer choices, "buy local" is probably not as important as [buying less](#) — especially of the most wasteful and resource-intensive products, like red meat, single-use plastic, and gasoline.

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