

# The Great Hunter-Gatherer Continuum

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We all eat. What we eat, where it comes from, how it was grown, how workers were treated, the process of obtaining it – all of these factors leave their impact upon us and the earth. In the earliest times of human history, hunting-and-gathering was the chief pathway for obtaining food. From what we are able to learn of these times, this pathway had the least detrimental impacts on land and people – depending on the availability of an adequate variety of game and plants. Gradually, as animal domestication and agriculture arose, people increasingly impacted the natural environment in procuring their food. In this country we are not that far removed from a time when a much greater percentage of our population were active farmers. Many of us need look back only to our parents or grandparents generation to find personal examples of “people living close to the land” – by which I mean they had a cognitive and emotional awareness of how nature “works”; I do not mean a romanticized image of “our agrarian past.”

Considering the long sweep of human history, our patterns of obtaining food have changed remarkably in a comparatively short time. Now, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we in this country think nothing of buying pineapple from the Philippines, cocoa from Africa, coffee from Brazil, kiwi from New Zealand, and oranges from Florida; in the middle of winter; at the mall only minutes away. In the U.S. our food travels an average of 1,300 miles before it reaches our home! The “environmental footprint” of such a global food economy is many times greater than that of even our parents' generation. Are there practical steps we can take to mitigate the detrimental impacts of such a vast, complex system?

Yes. One place to begin is to consciously choose where and how we purchase our food. As we examine our choices we will use a model – a framework to organize our thinking about our range of options. This model is presented as a continuum. Harking back to our ancestors, I have called it the Hunter-Gatherer Continuum. In the weekly process of making shopping lists, planning at which stores to stop, anticipating the traffic, and fitting all this into the rest of my schedule, I often feel like a modern-day hunter-gatherer, foraging through the jungle of urban life.

## The Continuum

Dawning our pith helmets, let's get started. We can envision a spectrum of options for how we shop. The purpose of presenting this continuum is to help us recognize as clearly as possible the *range of choices* we have, and to thoughtfully *consider the larger impacts of these choices* upon our communities and the earth. This simple model is not meant to be exhaustive. You might be aware of other options, and where they might fit in to this simple model.

## Hunter-Gatherer Continuum

<b>Culturally Normative Food Choices</b>				<b>Most Earth and People Friendly Food Choices</b>	
Supermarket Only	Selective Supermarket	Some Specialized	Exclusively Specialized	Farmers' Market	Subscription Farm

The basic assumption in organizing this continuum is as follows: it begins on the left with the most common options, widely available in our society. As you move along the continuum toward the right, you move progressively away from the culturally normative pathways, towards those which are more earth-friendly, but also rarer. This means that your options will be fewer; therefore choosing these options usually requires more time and often longer commutes. Why then would we want to choose such options? Because these later options are more supportive of our local agricultural community and local food economies, as well as more nutritionally healthful for ourselves and our families. They are also more earth-friendly; that is, they are more likely to sell organically grown and chemically free products, from farmers who are likely to be thoughtful about their impact on the land.

Let us consider for a moment each of the steps along the continuum.

### **Supermarket Shopping**

Perhaps the most common food-purchasing pattern in our society is to simply shop at the closest supermarket, buying the brands we recognize and those items that are on sale. Here, while our choices are vast they are limited to those foods chosen by corporate supermarket chains – almost exclusively products of the vast, global agribusiness complex. Our choosing is often influenced by the constant blitz of advertising, in the media as well as in the store. We are functioning as a consumer within our economic system’s most accessible pathway. That system spends considerable time and money to try to shape our awareness. Advertisers will assume that our sole objective is to find the items we want in the freshest (looking) condition, with the widest possible selection of choices, for the lowest price, at the most convenient location (with plenty of accessible parking), from retailers whose names we recognize (from their ads). As far as they go, these are not bad considerations. However, other important factors (e.g. locally produced, organically grown, minimal processing, packaging, and shipping) are of minimal importance in most of these stores. Therefore, while this step on the continuum is culturally most expedient, it is also the least likely to be environmentally friendly, fair to farm laborers, or supportive of the local and regional food economy.

### **Selective Supermarket Shopping**

The next step along this continuum would be to continue to shop at the local supermarket, but to make a concerted effort to shop there as selectively as possible. Buy as many local products and produce as possible. Ask the management to stock local brands and locally grown produce. Seek out minimal and recycled packaging. Buy bulk items in containers you bring from home. Ask about the produce: where was it grown, is it organic, what pesticides were used, how were farm workers treated? Request that the manager stock products you have learned about from other sources, not just ads. In short, use your influence to encourage the supermarket chains to

stock more local, earth-friendly goods. In this option you are taking the initiative, both to become a more conscientious consumer and to exert your influence within our mainstream economy. The more people ask for local organic produce, the more likely the store will be to develop a section featuring these choices. Your efforts can make a difference.

However, your influence, and that of other like-minded consumers, is not the only factor which helps to shape the mainstream food economy. Supermarket chains, wholesale distribution systems, and large advertising and marketing organizations are all part of the even larger corporate agribusinesses network. Consumer pressure – even highly organized and orchestrated consumer pressure, such as national boycotts – is only one factor in a much larger field. Corporations have great faith in their ability to mold public opinion. Agribusiness corporations' policies are determined far more by their economic aspirations than by moral pressure. For boycotts to be effective they must involve millions of consumers and last for substantial periods of time. So while you can be a force within the mainstream for change, you should not overestimate the possible impact of limited efforts. But corporate agribusiness will pay attention to the success of “the competition” – one reason for considering the following options along the continuum.

### **Occasional Shopping at Specialized Retailers**

A next step is to shop occasionally at specialized retailers who focus on local, organic, and earth-friendly products – such as co-ops, natural food stores, and produce stands. As there are far fewer of these retailers than there are supermarkets, you may well have to go out of your way to patronize them. Perhaps you could go there once a month and stock-up. At some specialized retailers, the job of learning about the origin and production of the food has been done for you. More consumer education is incorporated into the organization of these stores. There are still decisions to make, but the whole array of choices is generally much more earth-friendly: produce is more often locally grown, worker conditions considered, pesticide use is minimal. The larger of such retailers (Puget Consumers Co-Op would be a good example, [www.pccnaturalmarkets.com](http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com)) often make available a wide array of educational materials and classes to help you become a more informed consumer. They sometimes offer cooking and nutritional classes to help you learn how to cook healthy dishes with potentially unfamiliar products. These businesses are significantly less tied into the agribusiness economy, more supportive of the local economy and local community efforts towards bioregional self-sufficiency. Products you can't find at these selective retailers, you still buy at the local supermarket on regular shopping trips. You have to plan ahead to shop successfully in this occasional way, or you will find yourself needing to go to two stores every week.

### **Regular Shopping at Both Specialized Retailers and Supermarkets**

The next step along the continuum would be to consciously do just that, shop at both types of stores regularly. On the whole you will probably purchase more food from the specialized stores in this pattern than when you shop there less frequently. Here you need not plan ahead as elaborately. You may well buy more from the specialized store, as you will become more familiar with its options. But, you will be doing more commuting. While the impact on your time and fuel is a factor you will need to consider, you will also exert more “purchasing power” to support the regional food economy, and eating more food which is healthy for you and for the earth.

### **Buying Almost Exclusively at Specialized Retailers**

The next step is to “bite the bullet” and buy as exclusively as you can at such specialized stores. Here your “economic vote” is maximally influencing the local retail economy towards supporting such green businesses. However, your range of choices for products will (most likely) be more limited. These smaller, local retailers simply cannot match the large supermarket chains for their vast array of choices. So, even the most dedicated earth-friendly shoppers often find that they will make occasional forays to the supermarket to pick up some hard-to-find items. In this step the bulk of your consumer power is being used to support the viability of the local food economy and protect your local environment.

### **Shop (When You Can) at Farmers' Markets**

A related step – usually available only from late spring through fall – is to buy food at community farmers’ markets. The bonus here is significant. You get the freshest produce, *all of your money goes directly to the local grower*, and you have an opportunity to get to know the farmer as well. As there are fewer farmers’ markets than there are specialized retailers, and they are usually open far fewer hours per week, this step increases the complexity of your shopping. However, you are now exerting a much more focused economic influence on your local farming community, helping to keep small family farming alive in your area – and their land from becoming malls or subdivisions. Many farmers' markets are developing a sizable community of support, and often include booths for local crafts people and artists, even strolling musicians, a truly festive atmosphere. So shopping at them can be an enjoyable experience in itself, making the old corporate supermarket seem rather sterile by comparison.

### **Be a Subscriber to a Community Supported Agriculture Farm**

The final step in this continuum, requiring the greatest commitment, is to become a subscriber to a (community supported agriculture) “subscription farm”. Here customers contract directly with farmers; they become “subscribers” to that particular farm. You pay a lump sum (in advance of the growing season) for a share of that year’s produce. Then regularly, at a designated time each week of the growing season, you pick up your portion of that week's harvest. Your life in some measure will need to be coordinated with the cycles of nature and the farm routine. You will get more food in bulk (i.e. lots of corn at one time, lots of tomatoes at another), much like having your own garden. You might want to put-up some of the food for later. Clearly this option requires the most planning, just as in using the produce from your own garden. And, as with your own garden, the food could not be fresher. This step will, of course, require that you continue to purchase (at some retailer) all those other food items which a small farm cannot be expected to produce (staples, dairy, crops not grown in your region, etc.). It is also essentially seasonally limited; in winter you are back at the grocery store full-time.

Another advantage to subscribing to such a farm is that you can maintain a close connection with the grower. Some farms even allow for helping with the harvesting. In using this step on the continuum, you play a significant part in insuring the *continued economic viability* of local organic farms, as the farmer and subscriber both share in the risks of production: in good years you get more produce, in lean years, less. By your participation you have guaranteed that another farmer will not go bankrupt in a bad year and contributed to keeping one more farm an active part of your local economy. You and the farmer have become partners in nutrition, conservation, economics, and social change.

### **Gardening as an Adjunct to the Continuum**

As an auxiliary to the steps along this continuum, you can also cultivate your own vegetable garden. This is not really a step along the continuum itself, as you can garden as an adjunct to your hunting and gathering from any position along the continuum. Here you invest considerable time and effort, but you learn first-hand about the complex issues and joys of "living off the land". It is one thing to read about the complexities of organic farming, the vicissitudes of soil, weather, and sunshine, the foraging habits of numerous insects, and the marvels of composting; it is another to experience them first-hand. In addition, it has been scientifically demonstrated that no corn tastes sweeter, no tomatoes are juicier, no herbs are fresher, and certainly no zucchini more exuberant than your own! You've become a mini-farmer yourself, directly involved in both the labor and the miracle of life sustaining life – a witness to how God's creation works.