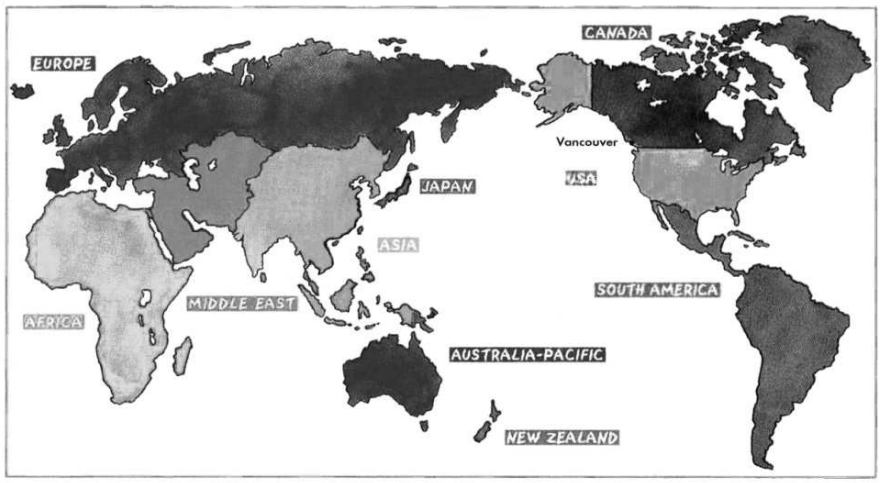
The true cost of food

NEW ZEALAND is 7,500 miles from the Okanagan valley of British Columbia, Canada. So why are BC grocery stores flush with New Zealand apples when perfectly good ones are grown in the Okanagan? In 2002, BC apple exports totalled 77 million pounds, while apple imports from New Zealand and elsewhere ran to 111 million pounds. British Columbians need more apples than they produce, but wouldn't it make sense to eat the apples their neighbors grow rather than bringing them in from the other side of the Pacific? What's more, many of the Okanagan farmers who could have made up the difference have been driven out of the industry by cheap imports.

Free market enthusiasts argue that consumers deserve the lowest price, and if New Zealanders can provide better value, good for them. But what is the true cost of shipping an apple from one hemisphere to another? What are the true costs of production, processing, packaging, and transportation with the standard food delivery system as compared to a local one?

A 2001 Iowa State University study showed that through the conventional food delivery system, the average apple in that state travels 1,726 miles to get to the consumer. Compared to Iowa-based regional and local systems, the conventional system used far more fuel, and released five to seventeen times more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In the US as a whole, food accounts for over 20 percent of all commodity transport, resulting in 120 million tonnes of CO_2 emissions every year.



Every day, planes, long-haul trucks, and container ships criss-cross the globe to ensure that western palates are properly satisfied. With the current system, green beans grown in Africa can be picked in the evening, loaded on the overnight flight to Heathrow airport, and on the shelves of London greengrocers by 11:00 the next morning. But even the British government recognizes that this is problematic and wants to ensure "that aviation meets the external environmental costs for which it is responsible." A good start would be taxing aviation fuel, which currently pays a zero rate, and that leaves airline travel incredibly cheap compared to its true cost. So the UK Department of Transport commissioned a study of air travel that pegged the environmental costs every time a Boeing 757 takes off at £5,140. How long until that cost is internalized? How cheap would the New Zealand apple be then? And how many orchards in the Okanagan could be saved?