

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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What Are the Benefits of Organic Foods?

As I mentioned last month, our consumption rate is excessively high and with time it should be reduced. But what about food items? Do we need to reduce the consumption of food, or just eat smarter? I think it is a combination of both. Reducing our consumption is somewhat easy, but how do you eat smarter.

There is a growing trend to eat smarter by eating organic foods. But what exactly are organic foods and how do you know if they are organic or not? The word "organic" refers to the methods used by farmers to grow fruits, vegetables, and grains, and also methods for raising animals and processing dairy products. Organic farmers apply natural fertilizers as opposed to chemical fertilizers, use natural methods for reducing pests and disease rather than spraying insecticides. They also rotate crops, till, hand weed or mulch to manage weeds rather than using chemical herbicides. Organic farmers give animals organic feed, allow the animals access to the outdoors, and use preventive measures such as rotational grazing and a balanced diet to minimize diseases. The normal procedure is to give animals antibiotics, growth hormones and medications to prevent disease and spur growth.

In order to understand whether a food product is organic or not has been made simple because the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has established labeling regulations. There are basically three different labels: 1) "100 percent organic" means that the product is completely organic or made of all organic ingredients, 2) "Organic" products are at least 95% organic, and 3) "Made with organic ingredients" means that these products contain at least 70% organic ingredients. No other product can use the word "organic" on its label. And don't be confused by words like "all-natural", free-range" or "hormone-free". None of these should be confused with the word "organic".

There is also any even higher quality of organic food that is not often mentioned because it is in such limited supply. A food can be Biodynamic certified awarded by Demeter International, signifying that the food was grown under very special conditions. Biodynamic farming requires all natural fertilizers but even these cannot be produced with materials such as offal, blood, horn or hoof meal, and they may not be produced in the vicinity of nuclear or electrical power plants and installations. Further, the farming plots must meet these requirements for three years prior to planting.

But is organic food really better for you? Some experts claim that organic food contains 50% more nutrients, minerals and vitamins than produce that has been intensively farmed. On the other hand, the Mayo Clinic states that there is no conclusive evidence that organic food is more nutritious than conventionally grown food. Even the

USDA does not claim that its “organic” products are safer or more nutritious. This may be to avoid implied endorsements.

The other consideration is where these organic food products are grown and how they get to their eventual consumer. About 90-95% of the organic food consumed in the Chicago area is grown on the west coast, primarily in California. That means it has to travel about 2000 miles to go from the farm to the consumer. You may be eating a higher quality food product at the expense of the environment if you consider the consumption of fuel and the emission of carbon dioxide. Some of the processed food consumed in the Midwest may originate from an organic farm in California, shipped to Mexico for processing and then delivered to the Midwest for consumption. While the food is probably of very high quality, where it is consumed may not necessarily be good for the environment. It is not any easy decision when trying to balance the consumption of organic food with what is good for the environment.

In one of my earliest columns, I presented an argument why bottled water should not be consumed, but rather we should only consume tap water. Last month, however, there was a report about discarded medicines finding their way to the water treatment plants and eventually in the tap water. The water treatment plants do not have a process for removing these medicinal products because this was not a problem when the treatment plants were first designed. Should you now switch to bottled water? This would not help since most bottled water is nothing more than tap water in a bottle. Also, I am not sure whether an extremely small quantity of, say, Ibuprofen in your tap water would have a detrimental effect on anyone. I still maintain there is no reason for anyone in major cities like Chicago to drink bottled water.