

Tropical taste

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Fiji, located in Oceania, is an island group in the South Pacific Ocean, about two-thirds of the way from Hawaii to New Zealand

Famous celebrities are developing a taste for a brand of bottled water that has to be shipped 10,000 miles. Fiji, a mineral water hailing from the island of the same name, looks set to become a best-seller, in a new development that will horrify environmentally-minded geographers!

James Bond actor Pierce Brosnan, "Riddick" actor Vin Diesel and singer Jessica Simpson are among the celebrities who are reported to have developed a taste for Fiji water. Each litre costs £1.24 but is shipped 10,000 miles from the Pacific island state to be sold in stores such as Waitrose. The excessive distance travelled by this product has led to its being singled out in a report by the Food Commission (an independent national non-profit organisation funded by donations) as an especially 'ludicrous' example of unnecessary importing. A spokesperson suggested that 'all these bottled waters mean extra trucks on the road, extra fuel use and extra carbon dioxide emissions, when consumers could simply turn on their taps'.

This is, of course, merely the tip of the iceberg. The news item, appearing in [The Daily Telegraph](#) (03 November 2004), draws attention to a growing trend of major supermarkets sourcing products from even more remote regions (see inset). Huge cargo vessels are used to transport non-perishable items such as bottled water, but fresh fruit and vegetables need to be flown to the UK – a highly polluting form of transport. Each air-borne delivery of sugar snap peas from Guatemala releases 4,500g of greenhouse gas into the atmosphere, for instance ([The Guardian, Food, 10 May 2003](#)).

Common food imports to the UK

Sugar snap peas Guatemala 5,000 miles

Asparagus Peru 6,000 miles

Pears Argentina 6,500 miles

Carrots & peas South Africa 5,900 miles

Chicken Thailand 6,500 miles

Prawns Indonesia 7,000 miles

Apples USA 10,000 miles

Grapes Chile 7,200 miles

Potatoes Israel 2,200 miles

Tomatoes Saudi Arabia 3,000 miles

Sprouts Australia 10,000 miles

Lamb New Zealand 14,000 miles

In addition to purchasing these unprocessed products, remember that the ingredients for sandwiches and 'ready meals' are likely to be sourced from cheap overseas suppliers too. As a result, one single helping of a supermarket chicken casserole 'ready meal' that contains chicken, tomatoes and peas may have clocked up around 15,000 miles with just those three ingredients!

Sources: The Daily Telegraph, 03 November 2004; The Guardian, Food, 10 May 2003

Is this a sustainable way of living?

The *Ecological footprint* of MEDCs gets bigger every day. This is the area of land and water required to support a population at a specified standard of living. Industrialised economies have a large ecological footprint as they impact greatly upon land beyond their own borders. To support nearly 60 million people, the UK has had to increase its carrying capacity since the start of the industrial revolution. We appropriate resources from other nations and frequently pollute the same external areas while doing so. However, a distinction can be made between 'need-to-have' imports and 'nice-to-have' imports. While oil imports are essential to sustain our quality of life, imports of bottled water certainly are not. The only justification is that there is a supposed improvement in taste over other brands and over tap water.

Long-distance food and drink importing are undeniably damaging to the environment as they contribute to unnecessary carbon emissions as fuel is burnt transporting them. In the long term this is certainly an unsustainable practice, if predictions of human-driven climate change are correct.

To help reduce the environmental impact of long-distance resource importing, more consumers in the UK will need to voluntarily restrict themselves to eating locally-sourced seasonal vegetables in future. For instance, runner beans would only be eaten in summer and broccoli in winter. Tesco lorries currently drive a total of 224 million kilometres. Clearly, much of this could be reduced if food networks were shortened to rely more upon local suppliers.

What does Fiji tell us about global networks of production and consumption?

Transnational Corporations, such as UK supermarkets, have operations in many countries. Food is sourced from all over the world (this is the *production* of food) while stores are sometimes situated outside the UK too (this is the *consumption* of food). For instance, Tesco has already installed 170 stores in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Consumer demand generated by affluent nations such as the UK has helped drive the globalisation of food supply networks in recent decades, as average incomes have risen. This is due to:

- demand for cheaper food
- demand for greater variety of food and drink
- demand for fresh produce even when it is 'out of season' in the UK

It has become easier for suppliers to meet these demands. Transport costs have fallen while there are now fewer border controls between many nations, especially within the EU. Refrigeration of perishable goods allows sourcing from even remoter regions

Undeniably, the typical UK consumer benefits from these arrangements in the short-term, with the instant gratification of a wide range of perceived needs, often at very low cost. However, there are plenty of negative externalities associated with the greater globalisation of food supply. These include:

- The long-term cost to the UK economy of climate change, driven by carbon emissions that include unnecessary food and drink haulage.
- The greater diffusion of diseases carried by food and cattle such as Foot and Mouth, Rhizomania and Sudden Oak Death; also the spread of pests such as the Colorado Beetle.
- Poor countries do not always benefit from the growth of these networks as much as one might suppose. Levies on imports attempt to protect European farmers from cheaper competition. In the EU the levy is the difference between the import price and a minimum price which has been guaranteed to European farmers by Brussels. As a result, less has to be paid to the farmers that actually produce the imported food and drink, in order to keep their prices competitive.