

UROP Addendum: Thoughts on  
Farmers' Markets and Environmental Consciousness in Greece

During the months of July and August, 2009, I traveled to Greece through the University of Minnesota's Student Program for Amity among Nations (SPAN). I also received an Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) scholarship to support my research on the relationship between the culture of outdoor food markets and their influence/reflection of local perceptions of the environment.

I went to Greece expecting to find daily outdoor markets where shoppers chatted with farmers as they leisurely purchased their daily foodstuffs. In my vision, the vegetables were importantly dirty, so that the customer had a chance to brush off the earth's soil and realize that the food they were handling was not mass-produced in a factory but rather a gift from Mother Nature gathered by a neighborhood farmer. I assumed that those who shopped at outdoor farmers' markets chose to do so because they appreciated their community farmers and/or wanted to support sustainable farming that treats the environment as a living organism to be nurtured and appreciated.

The assumptions I held when I arrived in Greece were based on my understanding of farmers' markets in the United States. In my hometown in Minnesota, I go to the weekly farmers' market whenever I have chance. I enjoy being outside, supporting family farmers, and having the opportunity to talk directly to farmers about their farms and produce. I also appreciate the low cost and freshness of the produce, which I know was picked the day before it was sold. Consuming local produce instead of the produce shipped across the country to major supermarket chains, I avoid both the cost and pollution of transportation and the need for artificial ripening. Another reason I like going to the local farmers' market is because I think that small-scale farmers treat their land more responsibly than industrial farmers. At the farmers' market I visit, there are several farmers who practice sustainable agriculture or

organic farming techniques who clearly post their qualifications. I cannot prove that the other farmers participating in the farmers' market apply fertilizer and pesticides more responsibly than industrial farmers whose produce is found at the supermarket, but there is evidence that farmers' markets are popular outlets for small-scale and/or organic/eco-friendly farmers.<sup>1 2 3</sup>

The health of the environment is important to me and one reason that I shop at a farmers' market instead of a supermarket. Buying fresh produce reminds me that the earth is a productive organism and we have a responsibility to protect it, if not for the creatures we shared it with, then at least because if we destroy the environment, we threaten our own existence. I have studied chemistry, biology, physiology, and anthropology, and lived outside for five summers. The knowledge I have gained from both books and experience has made it very clear both how dependent humans are on the environment and how quickly we are polluting and irreversibly destroying the resources on which we depend. The recent Copenhagen Summit on Climate Change (December 7-9 2009),<sup>4</sup> which brought together the world's leaders to address the human-induced degradation of our environment, and the scientific research which prompted the conference, provide clear evidence that the environment is in trouble.

As I recognize the Earth as the shared home of a multitude of organisms, and I realize that that all of the food I eat and every molecule in my body is a product of the earth, I understand the importance of protecting the environment. While my opinions are perhaps stronger than most, I believed, before my research in Greece, and still believe now, although perhaps to a lesser extent, that

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<sup>1</sup> Helen, La Trobe. "Farmers' Markets: consuming local rural produce" *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 25 (2001): 182.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 187. This notes that UK organic farmers surveyed were more concerned about the environment than conventional farmers. I have learned from my research in Greece that local perspectives are not necessarily transferrable to other regions, opinions of American farmers *may* be the same.

<sup>3</sup> McCann, Elizabeth; Shannon Sullivan, Donna Erickson, Raymond De Young. "Environmental Awareness, Economic Orientation, and Farming Practices: A Comparison of Organic and Conventional Farmers." *Environmental Management* 21 (1997): 747-758. It is important to note that the sample size of this study was extremely limited: 12 organic farmers and 13 conventional farmers in or near one county in SW Michigan.

<sup>4</sup> More information at [http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop\\_15/items/5257.php](http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop_15/items/5257.php).

most Americans who frequent farmers' markets are environmentally conscious and interested in environmental protection.<sup>5 6</sup>

Conversely, before I traveled to Greece and before deeply contemplating the market-environment relationship, I assumed that patrons of supermarkets are not concerned about the environment in the least. It appeared to me that the main driving forces of American supermarket customers are cost and convenience. The U.S. food system is one in which highly-processed foodstuffs are often cheaper in terms of cost per calorie than raw or minimally-processed ingredients such as fruits, vegetables, flour, and eggs. In a U.S. supermarket, the vast majority of calories purchased are processed, packaged, and bear no resemblance to the corn, soy beans, chicken, etc. from which they came. Much of the food in supermarkets is pre-prepared, pre-cooked, and ready to eat. Sometimes even fresh vegetables are packed in plastic, sold as salad mixes or mixed vegetables for dip. Organic produce is available at most supermarkets, but the cost is prohibitive for many.<sup>7 8</sup>

As most supermarket patrons purchase prepared foodstuffs, the processing and packaging of which negatively affects the environment by consuming excessive energy and oil, I assumed that they do not care about the environment. I presumed that supermarket customers held completely different view on the environment than the patrons of farmers' markets, who showed their support for the environment by rejecting supermarkets in favor of local and organic. I didn't realize until writing this paper that the majority of organic produce sold in the U.S. is sold in grocery stores (\$3,868 million in

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<sup>5</sup> Rabb, Carolyn and Deana Grobe. "Consumer Knowledge and Perceptions About Organic Food." *Extension Journal*, 43 (August 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Kremen, Amy; Catherine Greene, and Jim Hanson. "Organic Produce, Price Premiums, and Eco-Labeling in U.S. Farmers' Markets." (2004). [www.ers.usda.gov](http://www.ers.usda.gov), accessed May 14, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Rabb, Carolyn and Deana Grobe. "Consumer Knowledge ..." *Extension Journal*, 43 (August 2005). <http://www.joe.org/joe/2005august/rb3.php>, accessed May 14, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Dimitri, Carolyn and Luanne Lohr. "The US Consumer Perspective on Organic Food." *Organic Food Consumers' Choices and Farmers' Opportunities*, (2007): 162.

sales versus \$400 million at farmers' markets),<sup>9</sup> and that, beyond environmental concerns, there a plethora of reasons for choosing where one shops and what one purchases.

I carried my assumptions about farmers' market patrons with me as I traveled to Greece to conduct research on how the culture of outdoor farmers' markets reflects and/or influences perceptions of the environment. Before going to Greece, a land with a strong tradition of outdoor markets, I expected to find an entire nation of American-like farmers' market customers—environmentally conscious citizens interested in buying from small-scale, local farmers in order to mitigate their environment impact while enjoying fresh and tasty food.<sup>10 11</sup>

After my ten weeks in Greece, I realized that I inappropriately projected many of my assumptions concerning "farmers' market culture" onto the Greek landscape. The contrasts I discovered between the tradition of outdoor markets in Greece and the increasingly popular markets in the U.S. illuminated my above-mentioned pre-research assumptions. Spending time in the markets and kitchens of Greece made clear to me that there are many factors which determine whether one chooses to purchase food at a supermarket or outdoor farmers' markets. While the environmental impact of a food's production and transportation is an important factor for me and other Americans,<sup>12</sup> I did not observe this as an important factor in the Greek tradition of frequenting outdoor markets.

One of my informants, a Greek social anthropologist I met in Evia, told me that the primary reason Greeks shop at the weekly market is habit. According to what I heard and saw in Greece, Greece has never had, and still does not have, the culture of jumbo supermarkets that have popped up in the United States. There was a supermarket three blocks from my apartment in Greece where my friends and I would go for *restina* (resin-flavored Greek wine), toilet paper, ice cream, and feta, but we would

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 160. -

<sup>10</sup> Dimitri, Carolyn and Luanne Lohr. "The US Consumer ..." *Organic Food...*, (2007): 162.

<sup>11</sup> Glig, Andrew W. and Martin Battershill. "Quality food farm in Europe: a possible alternative to the industrial food market and to current agricultural policies: lessons from France." *Food Policy*, 23 (Feb 1998): 25-40.

<sup>12</sup> Dimitri, Carolyn and Luanne Lohr. "The US Consumer ..." *Organic Food...*, (2007): 162.

only buy produce there if it was absolutely necessary because the selection extremely limited, the quality poor, and the price higher than the price at the market.<sup>13</sup>

Greeks have been frequenting the outdoor market for generations and I suspect they will do so for generations to come for three reasons: freshness, convenience and habit. First of all, the quality of produce at Greek supermarkets is very low. Even if a higher standard of freshness is established, it may be difficult to convince Greeks that the food is as fresh as that which they can buy at the market. Secondly, with a market in every neighborhood, farmers' markets are highly convenient. They are close by and provide almost all the foodstuffs one could want, from vegetables to fruit to spices, meat, fish, and feta. Additionally, some clothes, household items, and toiletries are also available. Thirdly, the habit of going to the daily or weekly market is deeply entrenched in Greek culture. It appeared that people of all walks of life go to the market, from old ladies to Filipina housemaids. As my friend and informant Yeoryia put it, "All people go to the farmers' market: the poor people, the immigrants—all people go to the market. It's not like here where only the hippies and the tree huggers go." The outdoor markets in Greece are convenient, accessible, and affordable.

In addition to freshness, convenience, custom, and price, two of my informants choose to shop at the market to support local farmers and to purchase local specialties found only at the market. Andy, the organic grain-sheep farmer I stayed with for three weeks in Bralos, Central Greece, said that coffee and chocolate are two of the few non-local products he purchases. While in Brazil, his family purchased Brazilian products; as a student in England, he lived an English lifestyle and ate English food; now in Greece, he chooses to support the Greek economy instead of buying imported goods. He sees no good reason to pollute the air and pay extra for goods from other nations when there is a bounty of nourishing and delicious food in his own country. Kerys, an English woman who runs the Sunshine Thai Massage Retreat with her Greek husband in Evia, shared a similar sentiment. Aside from soy sauce and

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<sup>13</sup> Author's personal observation while in Greece.

avocados, she chooses to buy only local products both to support the Greek economy and to mitigate the impact she makes on the environment. Her husband frequents the local market for the same reasons, with the additional motivation that only at the outdoor market can he purchase local mountain herbs, a local variety of plum, and other such local specialties. As I don't speak Greek, I could not conduct rigorous interviews with local shoppers, I was unable to determine whether or not supporting local farmers, buying local specialties, and/or mitigating the pollution caused by long-distance transportation was a factor in the majority of shoppers' decision to shop at the outdoor market instead of the farmers' market, but from the few shoppers I was able to speak to, these factors did not seem important.

Despite the differences of highly-/minimally-processed food and availability of local products, my research allowed me to draw the conclusion that the main reasons Greeks choose to shop at outdoor markets and most Americans choose to shop at grocery stores are the same: convenience, price, quality/freshness/taste, and habit. For Americans, the first two factors are more important, and for Greeks the later two, but both groups are strongly motivated by all four factors. I was disappointed to discover, as far as I could probe with my limited language ability, that interest in environmental protection was not obvious among the motivators of farmers' market patrons in Greece.

My experience in Greece provided ample fodder for reflection on the concept of environmental protection. Walking among the farms in Evia, I realized that I did not have a firm grasp of the meaning of "environmental protection". What sort of signs was I looking for to tell me that Greeks cared about preserving and protecting the environment? After much reflection, I have discovered that my idea of environmental protection is actually a lack of environmental problems: litter; air, water, and soil pollution; forest degradation etc. I realize that casually noting the amount of litter in a farm field or along the side of a street is a very superficial assessment of the environmental consciousness of a region's people, but litter always catches my eye and is a simple indicator to me that people simply

don't care about the beauty, much less function, of their surrounding environment. However, my assumption that litter and environmental consciousness have a causal, not just corollary, relationship was challenged during my stay in Thebes. During my three days living with Afghani refugees in Thebes, I discovered that perhaps some individuals do care about the environment, but they do not have the means or the knowledge to take act in an environmentally-friendly manner.



The means for protecting the environment include recycling systems and garbage disposal, the obvious need for which was starkly presented during my time with my Afghani friends. The ten men I stayed with lived in a small concrete-block building they had constructed, cooked over a wood fire outside, and had no running water, much less a place to deposit their trash where it would be collected and properly disposed. They threw all their trash, primarily used boxes of tomato sauce, plastic bottles that once contained cooking oil, and plastic wrappers from occasional store-bought snacks, over the concrete wall that separated their living area from field of the neighboring farmer. This was the same field they used as their toilet, and it was thus littered with liquid and solid waste and warning scraps of toilet paper. The waste, hidden by the tall grass, was, for the most part, out of sight and out of mind, although I did see one of the men gathering the waste into boxes, perhaps to later burn. With no system to properly dispose of their waste, they had no alternative than to chuck it over the wall to remove it from their living area. I believe that they knew their actions were not healthy for themselves or the environment, but, with no mechanism for proper disposal, they had no choice.

The more I reflected on the meaning of environmental protection, the more complicated the situation became. For example, what exactly is “proper waste disposal”? In the U.S. much of our trash is

collected and dumped into giant landfills, sometimes polluting the surrounding water and soil. Some regions avoid the problem of landfills by burning their trash. In this way they are able to generate power, but only at the expense of releasing greenhouse gases. Disposing of waste is actually only transforming it from one form into another: pollution.

In Greece, I became aware that there are a multitude of areas in which ideal mechanisms for “protecting the environment” are not obvious in the least. What constitutes “clean” energy? How do we balance the needs of a population that requires vast amounts of food with the health of the land and water that is degraded by the application of fertilizer? What is the value of man-made parks? Do these areas actually protect the environment or does the green space simply deceive people into thinking that a natural ecosystem is being protected? What form of transportation is best suited for low-density regions? What form of mining results in the least environmental degradation? As I knew intuitively before my research, but only realized consciously upon reflection of my time in Greece, every “solution” to our environmental problems has its downside. There is no quick fix and I must more fully understand local conditions; local attitudes, traditions, and behaviors; and local politics in order to make any sort of lasting impact on the health of the environment.

Reading *Earth Time* by David Suzuki and writing my paper months after my adventure in Greece had concluded, I realized that the issue of environmental protection is deeply entrenched in politics. The greatest deficit in initiating sustainable environmental practices is the lack of political will to implement programs to cut emissions and develop “clean” energy, support sustainable agriculture, foster “green” technological development and its world-wide implementation, fund nature reserves, and, most importantly, mandate conservation. Without reducing our consumption today, there will be nothing left for tomorrow. Conservation can be put off no longer.

The problem is that politicians have little incentive to implement environmental protection programs, which require a large initial investment for results that are only acknowledged far in the



future. As David Suzuki notes, “Political reality is dictated by a horizon measured in months or a few years. However, in nature, time scales are on a different order of magnitude, which explains why it is difficult to mesh economic and political deadlines with nature’s time needs.”<sup>14</sup> The solution to force politicians into action, as suggested to Suzuki by former vice-president Al Gore, is to “take it to the people...convince them there’s a problem. Explain the options so they demand action. Then...people like me will trip over ourselves to climb aboard the bandwagon.”<sup>15</sup> Observing both the environmental policy of the U.S. and hearing how Greek government officials can be paid off to look the other way at the strip mining violations and outright arson that has destroyed some of Greece’s mountainside, it is apparent that politicians have little interest in conserving the environment for future generations. My experience in Greece deepened the impression that I had before my research: most politicians, and citizens in general, apparently do not understand the degree of our environmental problem and thus they are willing to sacrifice the lives of millions of organisms and health of future generations for the short-term benefits of lower taxes, cheaper energy, and less expensive food.

In addition to the complexity of the concept “environmental protection”, and the importance of politics in creating change, I had two other important realizations during my research in Greece. First of all, I dismissed my self-created myth that most outdoor markets are “green”. When I asked vendors, in Greek, if their produce was grown with chemicals, they all said no. When I reported this to my advisor and several of my informants, they all told me that the vendors were fibbing in order to please their customers—Greeks favor “green” but I found that their preference was based more on flavor than environmental concerns. I do was unable to obtain prove as to whether or not the vendors were telling the truth, but my brief survey did convince me to be more skeptical. Reflection on my own assumption that outdoor markets are green, I came to the conclusion the fact that many people associate farmers’

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<sup>14</sup> Suzuki, David. *Earth Time*. (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1998), 51.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

markets as “green” may contrarily be detrimental to the sustainable agriculture movement; people may be less likely to actively support the sustainable agriculture movement if they believe there is no need because products are already “green”.

My second realization was the urgent need for environmental education. Environmental protection was not a hot topic in Greece during my research in the summer of 2009, and according to several of my informants, it was not until the 1990s that basic environmental responsibility (“Don’t throw trash out the window.”) was taught in schools. Greater education concerning the environmental effects of human behavior is required. For example, adults and children alike should be educated about the environmental impacts of different food production and processing techniques so that they will be able to make informed decisions concerning which type of farming they wish to support and which types of foodstuffs they wish to consume. Unless people clearly understand the long-term effects of their daily behaviors, they will certainly not sacrifice the short-term profits they currently enjoy for future benefit.

I had hoped to find in Greece that the culture of outdoor markets and valuing one’s food translated into environmental consciousness, but I was unable to confirm such link. As Glig and Battershill concluded about their research in France, “[T]he market [economic and physical] is not an effective mechanism for producing an informed or targeted marriage of supply and demand for quality food, or allowing the production of such food to provide an alternative mechanism in farm landscape conservation.”<sup>16</sup> As most consumers do not ask questions about the food they purchase, neither the physical farmers’ market nor consumer food choices appear to reflect environmental consciousness or have a significant impact on farming practices

While I was unable to confirm my hypothesis, I did learn a great deal from my research. I learned about conducting social anthropology research, from the necessity of a common language of communication to advantages of profuse background reading, the establishment of a clear thesis, and

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<sup>16</sup> Glig, Andrew W. and Martin Battershill. “Quality food farm in Europe...” *Food Policy*, 23 (Feb 1998): 25-40.

the difficulty of formulating non-leading interview questions. Additionally, in assuming that farmers' markets and environmental awareness were linked in Greece, I learned from my mistake of transforming a relationship of correlation into that of causation, equating the foundations of two phenomena simply because they are superficially similar, and of translating assumptions from my own culture into a different setting. Most importantly, I learned that an issue cannot be considered only from one aspect—tradition, history, convenience, economics, politics, education, and personal preferences, just to name a few—must all be considered. My research project may have not been successful in proving or disproving my hypothesis, but it certainly improved my ability to perform social research and critically reflect on my experiences.

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