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07 December 2007 Far flung food: Europe's distant diets

ESF-COST conference examines food's journey from outside of the EU

Across the European Union, food is travelling more, and not always in ways that make sense. Consider the chocolate covered waffle: Last year, Britain both imported 14,000 tonnes, and exported 15,000 tonnes. And it is not just waffles that are travelling further, as Europeans are eating - and importing - more food from outside the EU than ever before.

At a recent conference, funded by the European Science Foundation (ESF) and the European Cooperation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research (COST), scientists and policy makers gathered to consider the problems that face future European food supplies. One important area of research looks at where food comes from, and how that food gets from the field to the fork.

Results, presented at the conference in Budapest on November 5-6, show that food is increasingly coming from outside Europe. "Europe is one of the world's top food importers", says Paul Watkiss, a policy advisor from Oxford in the UK. For example, half all vegetables and 95% of fruit consumed within the UK come from overseas nowadays.

Why are Europeans eating more food from other regions? Watkiss thinks that today's global food market is one reason. "In recent years, Europe has begun to trade with many more developing countries," he says. "These countries have much lower labour and production costs, so can often grow and process food much more cheaply than we can in Europe".

Another reason for changing European tastes is the growth of major supermarkets in Europe. Lidl, Tesco and Carrefour-among others-have sprung up in all European countries. These supermarkets source many of their goods globally and so they are not reliant on seasonal fruits and vegetables. "It is unclear whether supermarkets have changed Europeans expectations of the foods available all year round or whether they are just responding to consumer demand," says Watkiss. Either way, Europeans are eating less local food.

What's more, Europeans are buying more convenience food - food that is pre-cut, pre-cooked and pre-packaged. These 'ready-meals' often contain ingredients that have been imported from many different countries. Furthermore, the cutting, cooking and packaging of 'ready-meals' is often done in more than one place, resulting in food that is well-travelled even before it is ready to eat.

By studying what Europeans eat, scientists hope to understand the economic, political, and cultural impacts of food on European society. One obvious impact of Europeans buying food from outside Europe is that it has greater impact on the environment. For example, as food travels more, it has to be protected with more packaging. "This means that, on average, 5% of what we buy in supermarkets is packaging", says Watkiss. Also, greater food transport causes more road congestion, greater damage to infrastructure, and higher emissions of pollutants, including greenhouse gases.

By better understanding the impacts of food distribution on European food supplies, scientists hope to encourage European policy makers to think about how efficiently food is produced and consumed, and the consequences of food traveling further. The conference was attended by 75 scientists and policy makers from 22 countries and was one of the series of research conferences organised by the ESF-COST Forward Look initiative. Forward Look, a flagship instrument of the ESF, allows scientists to meet people from the world of policy and help set priorities for future research.

This Forward Look is a multidisciplinary joint ESF/COST initiative, which involves the ESF Standing Committee for Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences (LESC), the ESF European Medical Research Councils (EMRC), the ESF Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH), the ESF Standing Committee for the Social Sciences (SCSS) and the COST Domain Committee for Food and Agriculture (FA).

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