Ecological citizenship and sustainable consumption: Examining local organic food networks

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Abstract

Sustainable consumption is gaining in currency as a new environmental policy objective. This paper presents new research findings from a mixed-method empirical study of a local organic food network to interrogate the theories of both sustainable consumption and ecological citizenship. It describes a mainstream policy model of sustainable consumption, and contrasts this with an alternative model derived from green or 'new economics' theories. Then the role of localised, organic food networks is discussed to locate them within the alternative model. It then tests the hypothesis that ecological citizenship is a driving force for 'alternative' sustainable consumption, via expression through consumer behaviour such as purchasing local organic food. The empirical study found that both the organisation and their consumers were expressing ecological citizenship values in their activities in a number of clearly identifiable ways, and that the initiative was actively promoting the growth of ecological citizenship, as well as providing a meaningful social context for its expression. Furthermore, the initiative was able to overcome the structural limitations of mainstream sustainable consumption practices. Thus, the initiative was found to be a valuable tool for practising alternative sustainable consumption. The paper concludes with a discussion of how ecological citizenship may be a powerful motivating force for sustainable consumption behaviour, and the policy and research implications of this.

1. Introduction

‘Sustainable consumption’ has become a core policy objective of the new millennium in national and international arenas, despite the fact that its precise definition is as elusive as that of its predecessor on the environmental agenda, sustainable development; the extent and nature of the transformation required is hotly debated, reflecting as it does competing deep-rooted beliefs about society and nature (Seyfang, 2004). For some, it is sufficient to ‘clean up’ polluting production processes and thereby produce ‘greener’ products (OECD, 2002; DEFRA, 2003b); for others, a wholesale rethinking of affluent lifestyles and material consumption per se is required (Douthwaite, 1992; Schumacher, 1993). In both these conceptions of sustainable consumption, one of the principal actors for change is the individual consumer, regularly exhorted to ‘do their bit’ to ‘save the planet’ by purchasing recycled goods and demanding ethically produced products, for example DETR (1999).

Integrating sustainable consumption and production principles into everyday patterns of behaviour is a major policy challenge for governments seeking long-term sustainability, yet there is an acknowledged need for new tools and instruments to put this into practice (DEFRA, 2003b; HM Government, 2005). At the same time, demands from the agricultural sector for support in building viable livelihoods can sometimes appear to contradict environmental priorities in rural areas within current policy frameworks. There has been a growing interest in (re-)localised and organic food supply chains from academics, policymakers, community activists and government (see for example Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Winter, 2003; Weatherell et al., 2003; Saltmarsh, 2004b; Norberg-Hodge et al., 2000; Stagl, 2002) seeking to understand its potential to combine rural sustainability with changing behaviour for sustainable consumption, and this paper makes a
contribution to that literature with a fresh theoretical approach and new empirical evidence.

This paper begins with a critical review of sustainable consumption theories and practices, considering the models on which current UK policy is based, and develops an argument for a ‘strong’ or alternative version of sustainable consumption such as that proposed by the green ‘New Economics’ school of thought. This proposes ‘downscaling’ consumption and pursuing ‘quality of life’ rather than economic growth as a development goal. While attention is increasing being paid to these ideas (see for example Jackson, 2005), there is very little empirical evidence about the ways in which such theories might be put into practice.

One suggestion which has been proposed by Dobson (2003) is to develop ‘ecological citizenship’ as a shared personal commitment to sustainability. Dobson argues that ecological citizens will feel a sense of environmental responsibility on a planetary scale, and will take action in their daily lives to reduce unjust impacts on others, for instance by considering the implications of their routine purchasing decisions and changing behaviour accordingly. Ecological citizenship may offer a new route to sustainable consumption which avoids the punitive and restrictive financial measures commonly associated with efforts to reduce the impacts of consumption decisions, as ethically motivated citizens voluntarily make the required changes in lifestyle. Yet despite its potential as an innovative motivational force for behaviour change for sustainable consumption, ecological citizenship is an under-researched area.

This paper addresses both these knowledge gaps and presents new research findings from a mixed-method empirical study of a local organic food network to interrogate the theories of both sustainable consumption and ecological citizenship. It tests the hypothesis that ecological citizenship is a driving force for ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption, via expression through consumer behaviour such as purchasing local organic food. In order to do this, first the concept of sustainable consumption is unpicked to identify mainstream and alternative models. Then the role of new localised and organic food networks is unpacked to identify mainstream and alternative models. This paper addresses both these knowledge gaps and presents new research findings from a mixed-method empirical study of a local organic food network to interrogate the theories of both sustainable consumption and ecological citizenship. It tests the hypothesis that ecological citizenship is a driving force for ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption, via expression through consumer behaviour such as purchasing local organic food. In order to do this, first the concept of sustainable consumption is unpicked to identify mainstream and alternative models. Then the role of new localised and organic food networks is unpacked to identify mainstream and alternative models.

2. Sustainable consumption: mainstream and alternative models

Sustainable consumption has entered the international policy agenda in recent years as a means to align economic development with environmental policy, and the OECD have set the standard definition adopted in international policy arenas:

> sustainable consumption is the use of goods and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations (Norwegian Ministry of Environment, 1994, cited in OECD, 2002; 9).

In 2003, the UK government published its strategy for sustainable consumption and production (DEFRA, 2003b). This policy strategy proposes that continued economic growth is compatible with environmental protection, through improved efficiency and market transformation driven by informed and motivated ‘sustainable consumers’, and echoes the statements of organisations such as the OECD. In its 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy, the UK government placed ‘a sustainable economy’ as a foundation for sustainable development, and discusses initiatives to enable this such as product labelling, consumer education and environmental taxation (HM Government, 2005). This definition of sustainable consumption and the ecological modernisation assumptions it is based upon (individual consumers’ choices driving market transformation), are the subject of much criticism from proponents of a more radical conception of the changes required in consumer behaviour to deliver sustainability. Not least of these is the UK government’s own Sustainable Development Commission’s assertion that linking sustainable consumption with economic growth is mistaken because it ties it to the framework responsible for unsustainable consumption (Porritt, 2003).

The Commission is joined by a number of commentators, academics, practitioners and policymakers in arguing for significant changes to the lifestyles of developed countries in the interest of equitable, sustainable livelihoods, and for policies to support these goals (Jackson and Michaelis, 2003; Reeves, 2003; Levett et al., 2003). The major criticisms of the mainstream policy approach to sustainable consumption from the new economics perspective are fivefold. First, that it relies upon a market which externalises environmental and social costs, and so sends the wrong price signals. Second, it ignores the range of psychological and sociological motivations and other factors influencing consumption behaviour such as affordability, availability, convenience, aspiration, empowerment, self-esteem, need for belongingness and identity, etc. Third, it pits individual atomistic consumers against global corporations and political structures, in a bid to solve global environmental problems, when collective effort would be more appropriate. Fourth, it is only
applicable in relation to consumer goods, rendering the vast quantity of institutional consumption—both of governments and of infrastructure—out of the reach of consumer pressure. And fifth, it cannot encompass action to reduce consumption and seek alternative channels of provision such as informal exchange networks by consumers eager to create institutions representative of their values (Seyfang, 2004, 2005).

The critics of this mainstream version of sustainable consumption propose quite a different model, based upon a different set of assumptions and beliefs about the nature of the environment and society. This alternative conception of sustainable consumption entails reducing the consumption of consumers in developed nations, and redefining ‘wealth’ ‘prosperity’ and ‘progress’ in order to construct new social and economic institutions for governance which value the social and environmental aspects of wellbeing alongside the economic. Furthermore, they place a much greater emphasis on the potential for collective action to overcome the powerlessness and individualisation of responsibility inherent in the mainstream model (Maniates, 2002). The theoretical basis of this position is known variously as ‘new’, ‘humanistic’, or ‘green economics’ (Boyle, 1993; Robertson, 1990); this paper is concerned with exploring the practical social implications of this normative theory. ‘New economics’ emerged from the environmental movement and built upon the work of green writers such as Schumacher (1993) and Robertson (1990) to develop a body of theory about how a ‘green’ economics concerned with justice and social wellbeing could be envisioned and practised. Today, the New Economics Foundation (http://www.neweconomics.org) is the leading think tank concerned with developing practical knowledge and skills in this area, while theorists such as Jackson (2005), Ekins (1986), Ekins and Max-Neef (1993), Douthwaite (1992), and O’ Riordan (2001) are pursuing these ideas within the academic world, for instance by developing new measures of wellbeing, seeking to understand consumer motivations in social context, and debating how an ‘alternative’ sustainable economy and society might operate. Nevertheless, despite a growing number of practical applications of this model, there is a paucity of robust empirical research to test the ideas of this new economics approach. In this paper, we examine a particular type of practical application—local organic food networks—but first the rationale for such initiatives will be set out and we consider the potential role of new localised and organic food systems in the transition to sustainable consumption.

3. Local and organic food networks

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the phenomenon of ‘alternative agro-food networks’, and locally sourced organically produced food has been suggested as a model of sustainable consumption for a range of economic, social and environmental reasons. These multiple rationales will be discussed here, locating them within, and elaborating on the alternative theory of sustainable consumption described above, in order to uncover the ways they address questions of ecological citizenship.

Organic production refers to agriculture which does not use artificial chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and animals reared in more natural conditions, without the routine use of drugs, antibiotics and wormers common in intensive livestock farming. In this sense, ‘organic’ is merely a production technique, and does not necessarily entail any change in structures of provision. The first sustainable consumption rationale for organic food is that it is a production method more in harmony with the environment and local ecosystems. By working with nature rather than against it, and replenishing the soil with organic material, rather than denuding it and relying upon artificial fertilisers, proponents claim that soil quality and hence food quality will be improved, biodiversity will be enhanced, and farmers can produce crops that have not resulted in large-scale industrial chemical inputs, with attendant pollution of waterways and land degradation (Reed, 2001); a second urge is to protect individual’s health by avoiding ingestion of chemical pesticides. Today, the most commonly cited reasons for consuming organic food are: food safety, the environment, animal welfare, and taste (Soil Association, 2003).

The area of land within the UK certified (or in conversion) for organic production has risen dramatically in recent years: in 1998 there were under 100,000 hectares and by 2003 this had risen to 741,000 hectares (DETRA, 2003a), and a new government scheme to encourage wildlife on farms has increased the subsidy to farmers to £60 per hectare for organic land, compared to just £30 for non-organic (Soil Association, 2004). However, while this rapid expansion signifies a growing demand for less environmentally-damaging food production, Smith and Marsden (2004) point out that the sector may be evolving towards a ‘farm-gate price squeeze’ common within conventional agriculture, which will limit future growth and potential for rural development. Farmers keen to diversify into organic production as a means of securing more sustainable livelihoods in the face of declining incomes within the conventional sector are confronted with an increasingly efficient supermarket-driven supply chain which increasingly sources its organic produce from overseas. Currently, 65% of organic produce eaten in the UK is imported, and 82% is sold through supermarkets (Soil Association, 2002). A key challenge for small organic producers is therefore to create new distribution channels to bypass the supermarket supply chain, and organise in such a way as to wield sufficient power in the marketplace.

Organics has until the 1990s been a niche environmental interest, expressing a desire to bypass intensive agriculture and return to small-scale production, and grow a new sense of connection with the land, through a concern for the authenticity and provenance of the food we eat—in
other words, a social as much as a technological innovation (Smith, 2005). As such, it has been representative of a movement towards the (re)localisation or shortening of food supply chains, and explicitly challenges the industrial farming and global food transport model embodied in conventional food consumption channelled through supermarkets (Reed, 2001). Localisation of food supply chains means simply that food should be consumed as close to the point of origin as possible. In practice, this will vary from produce to product, and the construction of ‘local’ is both socially and culturally specific, and fluid over time and space (Hinrichs, 2003); in the UK, consumers generally understand ‘local’ to mean within a radius of 30 miles or from the same county (IGD, 2003). A recent poll found that 52% of respondents with a preference want to purchase locally grown food, and another 46% would prefer it grown in the UK (NEF, 2003), and the explosion of farmers markets from none in 1997 to 450 in 2002 (National Association of Farmers Markets, 2002), direct marketing, regional marketing and other initiatives has supported this turn towards ‘quality’ and ‘authentic’ local food (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Murdoch et al., 2000).

The principal environmental rationale for localising food supply chains is to reduce the impacts of ‘food miles’—the distance food travels between being produced and being consumed—and so cutting the energy and pollution associated with transporting food around the world. Much transportation of food around the globe is only economically rational due to environmental and social externalities being excluded from fuel pricing (Jones, 2001). This results in the sale of vegetables and fruit from across the globe, undercutting or replacing seasonal produce in the UK. Pretty (2001) calculates the cost of environmental subsidies to the food industry, and compares the ‘real cost’ of local organic food with globally imported conventionally produced food. He finds that environmental externalities add 3.0% to the cost of local-organic food, and 16.3% to the cost of conventional-global food. A report commissioned by the UK government to investigate the utility of the ‘food miles’ concept for sustainable production and consumption finds that the direct environmental, social and economic costs of food transport are over £9 billion each year, of which over £5 billion are attributed to traffic congestion (and the value added by the agricultural sector is £6.4 billion and by the food and drink manufacturing sector £19.8 billion) (Smith et al., 2005).

However, social and economic rationales also call for re-localised food supply chains within a framework of sustainable consumption. In direct contrast to the globalised food system which divorces economic transactions from social and environmental contexts, the ‘new economics’ favours ‘socially embedded’ economies of place. This means developing connections between consumers and growers, boosting ethical capital and social capital around food supply chains, educating consumers about the source of their food and the impacts of different production methods, creating feedback mechanisms which are absent when food comes from distant origins, and strengthening local economies and markets against disruptive external forces of globalisation (Norberg-Hodge et al., 2000). Indeed, rather than being eroded by the demands of globalisation, these diverse embedded food networks are now flourishing as a rational alternative to the logic of the global food economy (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). Furthermore, there is a strong case that localised food networks make a significant contribution to rural development, and help mitigate the crisis of conventional-intensive agriculture, and have the potential to mobilise new forms of association which might resist the conventional price-squeeze mentioned above, through the development of new relationships and methods of adding value (Renting et al., 2003). This is demonstrated in a study of food supply chains in Norfolk which found that the motivations for many growers to sell locally included “taking more control of their market and [becoming] less dependent on large customers and open to the risk of sudden loss of business” (Saltmarsh, 2004b, chapter 3).

Many of these growers faced constant insecurity over sales, the likelihood of being dropped in favour of cheaper imported produce, were forced to put up with late payments, were unable to sell gluts, and saw high volumes of wastage due to appearance standards unrelated to the quality of the produce, etc. For these farmers, turning towards the local market was a means of stabilising incomes and self-protection. In addition to insulating farmers, localisation also builds up the local economy by increasing the circulation of money locally (the economic multiplier). In a study of the economic impact of localised food supply chains, Ward and Lewis (2002) found that £10 spent in a supermarket which leaves the area quite quickly, resulting in a multiplier of just 1.4, meaning it was worth £14 to the local economy. However, this ‘new localism’ (Goetz and Clarke, 1993; O’Riordan, 2001) calls for greater attention: localisation can be a reactionary and defensive stance against a perceived external threat from globalisation and ‘others’, and this exclusiveness can hinder the acceptance of diversity and difference—qualities of other localities (Hinrichs, 2003; Winter, 2003). Furthermore the local can be a site of inequality and hegemonic domination, not at all conducive to the environmental and social sustainability often automatically attributed to processes of localisation by activists. It also raises questions of ‘sustainability for who?’, as the nascent desire for locally produced food in developed countries inevitably impacts upon the economic and social destinies of food-exporting developing countries. In these cases it may be that ecological citizenship—discussed in the following section—which calls for cutting material consumption and hence a reduction in globally transported foodstuffs, is in conflict with a particular type of global citizenship which holds that participation in...
international trade is the most effective route to sustainable development for poorer countries.

One answer to this challenge is to argue for a globalised network of local activism which addresses the economic and social needs of developing countries reliant upon food exports, and which prioritises fair trade for products which cannot be produced locally. Banana Link is one such organisation, which seeks to build solidarity links between UK consumers and retail workers and Central American banana growers and farm workers struggling to improve working conditions and local environments, while simultaneously lobbying at the international level to improve the terms of trade (Banana Link, 2005). Hence a reflexive localism offers ecological citizens the opportunity to forge both local and global alliances with progressive actors at the local level and consciously avoid the negative associations of defensive localism (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005).

4. Ecological citizenship

Citizenship is a hot topic for consumers. Individual shopping and consumption behaviour are increasingly seen as a public arena of activism, and environmentalists are encouraged to put their money where their mouth is and ‘do their bit’ by buying ‘green’ or ‘ethical’ goods—a strategy for sustainable consumption proposed by the UK government (DEFRA, 2003b). In this way, citizenship is also a hot topic for environmentalists. Seeking to define and embed a new ‘environmental ethic’ in public debates and discourses, environmentalists aim for a rationale for changing behaviour towards more sustainable lifestyles motivated by an ethical position, rather than simply responding to superficial incentives. An environmentally informed morality implies particular types of political relationships—the nature of citizenship—between strangers, across generations and even across species (Dobson, 2003; Dobson and Valencia, 2005). This is a normative theory of change, and Dobson develops the idea of ecological citizenship by developing existing well-accepted theories of citizenship to accommodate environmental concerns, and proposes that ecological citizenship could be a motivating force for sustainable consumption.

But first, the nature of this citizenship should be described. In its traditional guises within liberalism and civic republicanism, citizenship concerns the status and activity of individuals in the public domain, in relationship to the state. Liberal political philosophy emphasises the rights of individuals, and the environment can be incorporated through a new language of environmental rights (Bell, 2005). For example, the human right to a habitable environment (as a prerequisite to all other rights) may be a sufficient claim to ensure action for sustainability. More controversially, the rights of non-human species can be argued for—challenging existing notions of who counts as a citizen—have been debated within liberalism. The second major strand of traditional citizenship thought is civic republicanism, which emphasises the duties and responsibilities that citizens have to act in the interests of the common good. Environmental responsibilities are easily introduced to this approach, as there is a great resonance with the concepts of self-sacrifice for the greater good and being an active citizen which run through green politics, encouraging people to associate the implications of their daily activities with the state of the wider environment. This dualistic notion of individuals acting according to either their personal, private interests or the collective public good is well developed within civic republicanism. Sagoff (1988) splits personal motivations into ‘consumer’ and ‘citizen’ interests, and argues that they are always in competition: the challenge is to find ways to ensure decisions are made according to ‘citizen’ rather than ‘consumer’ interests.

Citizenship is a politically contested and historically evolving term, however, and recent developments in feminism and globalization have prompted challenges to the traditional understandings of citizenship, which have ramifications for environmentalism (Dobson, 2003). Feminism argues that the traditional constructions of citizenship are not at all universal, and are gendered and inappropriate for many women, and that the private sphere is a legitimate space for the gaze and practice of citizenship—‘the personal is political!’. When environmentalists speak of the need to change our daily actions, for example through improving energy efficiency in the home, or cycling rather than driving a car, they are describing the private sphere as a site of citizen activity. At the same time, cosmopolitanism claims that people are citizens of all humanity rather than particular states. Clearly, this perspective resonates with environmentalism which describes us as inhabitants of the Earth, with global environmental problems to solve which transcend state boundaries.

While clearly falling outside the traditional definitions of citizenship in terms of political status, these two challenges are based upon theories that citizenship is very much about activity, and that citizen activity for the common good can take place at any scale, in private or in public. Given the transnational nature of the environmental problems facing humanity, it seems reasonable to adopt a notion of citizenship which extends possibilities for participative action to all people in all areas of life. It is this conception of citizenship which Dobson (2003) calls ‘ecological citizenship’, and it represents a clear departure from Sagoff’s dualistic understanding of private and public interests and activity: ecological citizenship explicitly defines private ‘consumer’ behaviour as political and a space for collective action for the common good. In this way, ecological citizenship rises above traditional understandings of citizenship to embrace new possibilities, in particular the development of consumption as a site of political activity and sustainable consumers as a key element of government strategy. What then are the obligations of an ecological citizen?
Dobson’s ecological citizenship uses the ‘ecological footprint’ metaphor (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996) as a touchstone for understanding the obligations of ecological citizens as a justice-based account of how we should live, based upon private and public action to reduce the environmental impacts of our everyday lives on others. In this model, each of us is responsible for taking up a certain amount of ecological ‘space’ in the sense of resource use and carrying capacity burden, and this space is expressed as a footprint on the Earth. It is assumed that there is a limited amount of ecological space available, which when equitably distributed among all inhabitants delivers an allocation of 1.8 global hectare per person. However, the footprint of the average European is 4.9 ha, and in the USA it is 9.2 ha—therefore current distributions are unjust and inequitable (Global Footprint Network, 2005). The ecological footprint of a western consumer includes areas spread across the globe, and impacts upon people distant in space and time. The footprints of people within industrialised nations are much larger than that of, and indeed have negative impacts upon the life chances of, the inhabitants of developing countries. The burning of fossil fuels, for example, has multiplied almost five fold since 1950, threatening the pollution-absorbing capacities of the environment, and the consumption differentials between developed and developing nations are extreme (UNDP, 1998).

In this way, environmental and social inequity and injustice is visualised. An ecological citizen’s duties are therefore to minimise the size and unsustainable impacts of one’s ecological footprint—though what is ‘sustainable’ is of course a normative rather than technical question (Dobson, 2003). Ecological citizenship is non-territorial and noncontractual and is concerned with responsibilities and the implications of our actions on the environment and on other, distant people; a similar model, called ‘planetary citizenship’ is put forward by Henderson and Ikeda (2004). Developing this idea into a practical network application, Alexander (2004) explains “Planetary Citizenship is about identifying with the Earth as a whole and the whole of humanity, about working towards a collaborative instead of a competitive world, with a re-shaped economy driven by social and environmental need rather than financial pressures”. In both these cases, the challenge is to find mechanisms and initiatives and a meaningful social context both for developing ecological citizenship, and for expressing ecological citizenship in daily life—in the supermarket, the classroom, the household and the workplace—in other words, to enable and encourage people to act as ecological citizens and reduce their ecological footprints and specifically to overcome the limitations of the mainstream sustainable consumption strategy outlined above (Dobson, 2003; Seyfang, 2005).

It is a descriptive rather than explanatory concept, a normative model of how an environmental ethic could be derived, and what it could advocate, and it contains a theory of change: namely that ecological citizenship could be a driving force for sustainable consumption, via expression through consumer behaviour such as purchasing local organic food. This is the central hypothesis tested in this paper, as represented in Fig. 1.

5. Eostre Organics: a local organic food network

In order to investigate the theory and practice of ecological citizenship and sustainable consumption, this paper presents new research findings from the first empirical investigation of an organic food producer cooperative in the UK. This East Anglian organisation, named Eostre Organics (pronounced ‘easter’, and named after the Anglo-Saxon goddess of regeneration), aims to build a ‘fair, ecological and cooperative’ food system, and sells to local businesses and hospitals as well as through market stalls and weekly boxes of mixed vegetables and fruit delivered direct to consumers throughout the region. Eostre won the Local Food Initiative of the Year award in the Soil Association’s Organic Food Awards in 2003, given to the business or venture considered to have shown most “innovation and commitment in making good food locally available” (Eostre Organics, 2004a). It is therefore emblematic of the model of sustainable food as elaborated in the previous section of the paper, and furthermore is considered an exemplar of its type.

The research was a multi-method study carried out during the spring of 2004, and consisted of site visits to Eostre’s headquarters and market stall, interviews with organisers and staff, documentary analysis of their web site and newsletters to ascertain the scope and nature of activities, objectives and values. This was complemented by two self-completed customer surveys: the first survey of market stall customers achieved 65 responses out of 110 distributed over a 2-week period (59%); the second surveyed the 252 customers of three weekly box schemes supplied by Eostre (79 responded, giving a response rate of 31%) whose geographical spread is shown in Fig. 2. The surveys asked about motivations for, and experiences with consuming local organic food, and are considered together here (overall response rate 39%) unless specified otherwise. There were both closed- and open-ended questions in order to elicit the respondent’s own interpretations and meanings of their actions and the discourses they used to explain them. Qualitative analysis was used to code and analyse these responses, alongside quantitative analysis of other data.

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![Fig. 1. Hypothesised relationships between ecological citizenship, local organic food networks and sustainable consumption.](image-url)
5.1. *Eostre Organics*: origins and values

Eostre’s organisational origins lie within Farmer’s Link, a Norfolk-based NGO which was inspired by the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 to improve the sustainability of farming in developed countries, and making solidarity links with UK farmers. In 1997, it set up East Anglia Food Link (EAFL) to promote conversion to organic production in the region. EAFL’s vision is one of localism—building direct links between farmers and consumers to create more sustainable food supply chains and benefit local economies and communities (EAFL, 2004). EAFL developed links with European organic growers and was inspired by the strength and growth of producer cooperatives, and persuaded local organic growers who were already intertrading informally, to adopt a formal cooperative structure to develop new markets and help grow the member businesses. Eostre was established in 2003 with a DEFRA Rural Enterprise Scheme grant, with nine members, seven associate or prospective members including one overseas member: the El Tamiso organic producer cooperative in Padua, Italy, which itself comprises over 50 businesses.

Eostre Organics is a food business with a mission: its charter states:

Eostre believes that a fair, ecological and co-operative food system is vital for the future of farming, the environment and a healthy society. Direct, open relationships between producers and consumers build bridges between communities in towns, rural areas and other countries, *creating a global network of communities, not a globalised food system of isolated individuals* (Eostre Organics, 2004b, emphasis added).

Its specific aims include: to supply consumers of all incomes high-quality seasonal produce; to encourage co-operative working among its members and between the co-op and consumers; transparency about food supply chains; to source all produce from UK and European regions from socially responsible producers and co-ops promoting direct local marketing, and from fair trade producers outside Europe; to favour local seasonal produce and supplement (not replace) with imports; to minimise packaging, waste and food transport; to offer educational farm visits to raise awareness of the environmental and social aspects of local organic production (Eostre Organics, 2004b, emphasis added). From these objectives, it is clear that Eostre is strongly supportive of the alternative conception of sustainable consumption, which favours re-localisation, reducing environmental impacts and ecological footprints, and that there are clear expressions of ecological citizenship values here too.

5.2. *Eostre’s producers and consumers*

The principal objective behind Eostre’s formation was to provide a source of sustainable livelihoods and business viability for small local organic producers, as a response to a decline in rural farm employment and competition from overseas in international markets. In the Eastern region of the UK, farm employment has fallen from 66,305 in 1990 to 49,409 in 2003, a drop of 25% (DEFRA, 2004), and Eostre aims to tackle this decline in rural employment by supporting small growers. Fig. 2 illustrates the size and distribution of Eostre’s members farms across the eastern counties. Between the nine local members, Eostre accounts for 1055.8 ha of diverse farmland, including 1.6 ha (with a quarter of this under glass) to 48.6 ha of farmland on rich fenland peat, to 445.2 ha of arable farmland and grazing pasture. The average farm size of Eostre members is 117.3 ha, though most are much smaller than this: three are less than 5 ha, and the median is 24.3 ha. In comparison with the agricultural sector in the region where the average holding is 73.9 ha, most of Eostre’s farms are very small (DEFRA, 2004) and they are mostly 100% organic. Normally, this is a problem for growers seeking to supply local markets, as stability of supply cannot be guaranteed. However, through collective organisation, Eostre’s members can achieve the scale required to penetrate such markets, for example by supplying market stalls and box schemes. Commercially, Eostre has been a success. The businesses of members grew over the first year or so that
Eostre was operational, with an increase in sales of 70% over 12 months. The cooperative now supplies produce to 13 box schemes, 15 market stalls (including the UK’s only full-time organic market stall on the general provisions market in Norwich city centre which has recently doubled in size, and weekly stalls in several market towns around Norfolk, plus monthly farmers markets), nine cafes, pubs or restaurants and 12 shops. Inroads have been made into public sector catering, through local schools, hospitals and prisons.

The motivations of Eostre’s consumers were surveyed to explore whether and to what extent ecological citizenship values played a part in their decision to purchase food from Eostre. Survey respondents were invited to answer, in their own words, why they chose to purchase local organic food. The answers fell into three main categories. The most common reason (given by 75.0% of respondents) was because organic food was considered safer, more nutritious, tastier or otherwise better to eat than conventional produce. The second most common motivation was environmental protection (70.5% responded this way), which covers avoidance of intensive chemical-dependent agriculture, through to reducing food miles and packaging waste. Finally, 65.2% cited a desire to support and strengthen the local economy and community, including favouring greater self-reliance, growing connections with where food has come from, and independence from global corporations and supermarkets. The following quotations from respondents show that for many, the various motivations are overlapping and interrelated categories.

“I care about what I eat and am keen to avoid taking in chemicals where possible. I would like to see a return to seasonal fruit/veg which we can only hope for if we support the smaller/local farmers. The general standard of local and organic produce far exceeds the tasteless, unripe supermarket produce”.

“Organic food has much greater energy for the body, instead of just being a stomach-filler. Organic food helps bring back small community living instead of alienated individuals feeling unconnected”.

“It feels good. It feels like a healthier way to lead one’s life. And that also means not being so dependent on the supermarkets. Plus it means not exploiting the environment by bringing food from overseas etc. There’s an holistic quality to buying food from a local supplier”.

“It cuts out the environmentally destructive chain of transport from one end of the world to the other”.

“This is important for me and my partner because we believe in sustainability regarding our environment, we are compelled to reducing our ‘eco-footprint’ in any areas we can”.

“I believe passionately that humanity must reduce its impact on the world. Using local organic food is just one way, but for many it is the most visible and accessible way”.

Clearly, while the primary motivation for consumption was a matter of personal taste and health concerns, the range of significant social, economic and environmental objectives expressed maps closely onto the sustainable consumption goals of the organisation itself. This suggests that customers share the ecological citizenship principles of Eostre in seeking to develop sustainable food supplies through localised channels. And the consumers did seem to buck up these principles with action: the average household expenditure on all food and drink of respondents was £71 a week; of this, over half (£37 or 52%) was spent on local or organic or fairly traded products (from all sources, not just Eostre). This represents a very significant use of consumption decision-making as political activity, and is far greater than the marginal expenditure found in other surveys, suggesting that the consumers are not representative of the general population (Williams and Doane, 2002). Rather, they may be described as a highly motivated group of ecological citizens, certainly conversant in discourses of sustainable consumption. They may have been introduced to these issues beforehand, or they may have learned about them as a result of interaction with Eostre, who adopt an educative, outreach role to inform and motivate consumers, through farm visits, newsletters, etc. In this manner, Eostre can be said to be actively nurturing ecological citizenship and simultaneously providing a means—and social context—for its expression.

5.3. Ecological citizenship, Eostre and sustainable consumption

The previous section has briefly outlined the origins and development of Eostre Organics, and the rationales given by member producers for participating, as well as consumers for purchasing from the company. This section discusses to what extent can an initiative like Eostre provide a means for developing ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption and overcome the problems with mainstream sustainable consumption practice identified at the start of this paper; and secondly, how well does the theory of ecological citizenship model the values and behaviour of the participants in this initiative?

The first obstacle to sustainable consumption in the mainstream strategy is the misleading price signals given in the market. The current pricing system externalises social and environmental costs and benefits, and this, together with current subsidy systems for intensive pesticide-dependent agriculture, results in local organic produce costing more than conventionally grown imported food. Working against this market disincentive, Eostre and their consumers believe that were the full costs and benefits to be accounted for, then conventional food would be much more expensive. Without the option of revaluing the entire market, they internalise these costs and benefits on a personal level, and conclude that the current price differential is an illusory incentive. One respondent stated “I can’t bear to think of the people who are often exploited
in developing countries to provide cheap food for supermarkets. I like to pay the ‘real cost’ for my food”, and others commented “It seems that the most important ecological concerns are ignored for the sake of money, and for this reason I try not to always think of price first”, and “I would much rather buy slightly more expensive goods and feel happy in the knowledge that I am supporting a more environmentally friendly and socially considerate enterprise”. This sentiment is shared by customers from all income levels, representing a strong commitment to environmental and social sustainability, even among those who can least afford it: one respondent said “it is difficult to get used to the higher price, but you get to accept it, and we cut down in other areas, i.e. charity shops, etc.” These sentiments reflect a deep commitment to sustainable consumption which goes far beyond that encouraged by the market price system, and which even runs counter to the incentives and signals offered by the market. In this way, we can say that the theory of ecological citizenship provides a good description of the values articulated through Eostre—namely a moral commitment, not simply a response to incentives.

Second, whereas mainstream sustainable consumption strategies assume that price and environmental information will result in behaviour changes, the alternative approach views economic behaviour as being intimately embedded within social relations, bringing complex issues to bear on efforts to change behaviour. From this perspective, sustainable consumption requires changes not simply from individuals, but from communities and their enmeshed personal and social relationships. The case study research found that for consumers, purchasing food from Eostre represents an intertwined set of objectives about rebuilding local economies, supporting ethical and environmentally motivated businesses, community-building, developing trust and local relationships, as well as delivering tasty, nutritious and safe food. The comments quoted earlier demonstrate this, and further statements include: “[I like] the sense of communal participation, starting from the feeling that we all know—or potentially know—each other, and continuing on through to wider issues, both social and environmental”, “I feel that the ‘connectedness’ is important and that modern industrial food provision has led to a further ‘rationalisation’ of nature in the 20th century and into the 21st”, and “I think that supermarkets are distancing people from the origins of food, and harming local economies”.

In particular, the localism and associated sense of connection between growers and consumers that this affords was important for many. This connection was facilitated through the personal contact provided by retail staff and the information they provided about the sources of food. For example, one customer explained “[the] source of food is more likely to be trustworthy and produced to a high standard. I like the traceability and accountability, as opposed to most supermarkets which are primarily accountable to their shareholders”, and another wrote “I like to know what I am eating and can trust the supplier that the food is fresh, local and natural” while another said “they are like-minded people”. Furthermore, Eostre organises educational farm visits so that customers can see where their food is grown, and publishes a regular newsletter which highlights sustainable food issues as well as offering recipe ideas and profiles of growers. In other words, there is a sense of community growing around this food network which nourishes its members, and enables them to participate as active members, and Eostre is attempting to promote and nurture the ecological citizenship which can then thrive in this meaningful social context.

Eostre’s marketing officer explains that localising food supply chains is absolutely central to Eostre’s operations, to building connections between communities and farmers, and to their customers’ environmental motivations: “People are becoming very eco-aware, and one of the biggest issues in any ecological awareness has got to be food miles”. In reference to organic food sold in supermarkets, she claims that “whatever benefits people gain from it being organic, they lose from the food miles it takes to get it here”, which is a sentiment shared by many customers. Yet the same argument can be made about some of Eostre’s produce, as much is imported (from the Italian cooperative, and from other organic and fair trade suppliers around the world) in order to guarantee a wide range of produce all year round. For example, in May 2004 the market stall was selling organic broccoli from France, onions from Argentina and carrots from Italy, while conventionally grown local produce was available on neighbouring market stalls at considerable lower prices.

There is therefore a complex trade-off to be made between organic and local produce. Some customers felt that they would prefer to see less imported produce, especially that which could be grown locally, and one stated “sometimes there seems to be a lack of local produce, and I still think Eostre runs up quite a few food miles… what about stockin e.g. Norfolk asparagus or strawberries?”, while another stated “buying organic isn’t worth the food miles”. This could be addressed by expanding the membership of local organic suppliers to provide a wider range of produce and so reducing reliance upon imported food, but the wider issue of how consumers should make choices between different ‘sustainable’ food choices is unclear in the absence of a clear sustainability food indicator which addresses the full range of issues involved—including the impacts of UK-based localisation on developing country producers.

Third, mainstream sustainable consumption strategies pit the individual against the corporation, in a mismatched battle for sovereignty. The alternative approach argues that powerful coordinated global businesses must be tackled by coordinated, global networks of consumers rather than isolated individuals. Eostre originated as a collective response to rural farmers’ vulnerability in the face of globalised food supply chains, and it is specifically
constituted as a co-operative. It aims to play a part in building supportive and ethical business networks across Europe and further afield to strengthen the hand of small growers to supply locally, and so provide an alternative to mainstream supply channels by working collectively for sustainability and stable rural livelihoods through developing local markets and avoiding supermarkets. In this way, Eostre is clearly shaping a coordinated response to global unsustainability through a network of small producers and individual consumers bound together by ethical and environmental principles, and its customers identify strongly with these aims. One commented “I like the knock-on effect of supporting local cooperative and organic farmers”, and another stated “I object to [supermarkets’] attitude to suppliers [ie squeeze them to keep the prices low]”. This empowerment through daily private decision-making with political implications is a core aspect of ecological citizenship, and the evidence suggests that Eostre is able to enfranchise its customers with a feeling of political agency which fulfils their need for expression and activism. Furthermore, it is apparent that both the producers and consumers involved with Eostre see their ‘private’ production and consumption decisions as having very real political impacts, and again this resonant with the model of ecological citizenship Dobson (2003) describes.

Fourth, one of the most significant criticisms of the mainstream sustainable consumption strategy is that it is limited to operating within existing markets and practices. The implications of what has been discussed so far is that Eostre and their customers are seeking to build an alternative infrastructure of provision to mainstream global food supply chains, and overcome this limitation. The cooperative structure has helped to achieve this objective, as it allows very small producers to access larger markets as part of a wider whole. For example, one smallholding of under 1 h has been supported in developing new markets through collective box schemes and market stalls, and another farmer, who was struggling as a conventional fenland farmer, now has greater livelihood security as an organic producer within Eostre (Saltmarsh, 2004a). Many of the cooperative members had previous bad experiences of selling organic produce to supermarket chains, and were keen to develop alternative marketing channels. The farmers complained of a fall in sales and prices during the 1990s recession, plus continual late payments, insecure sales, high wastage of produce and continual downward pressure on prices which resulted from dependency upon a single buyer. These farmers sought greater control over their businesses by developing direct marketing routes such as box schemes, farm shops, farmers markets, etc, and serving local markets, and Eostre was a means of furthering those aims, and a grassroots response to vulnerability caused by a global food market. This evidence indicates that there appears to be scope in this organisational structure and growth of direct marketing to avoid the limits to growth experienced by other parts of the developing organic sector identified by Smith and Marsden (2004) and Renting et al. (2003).

The structure of the business, the mechanisms and supply channels used also differ from the norm, being based upon fair trade, cooperative principles, and inspiring loyalty among customers who share those principles. This can be seen as an initiative to create alternative social infrastructure and provisioning systems which redefine wealth, progress and authenticity, and embody ecological citizenship principles, and then embed them in real-life practice. For example, in a localised organic food economy, seasonality of fruit and vegetables is recognised as a valuable aspect, rather than a hindrance, and some of the customers made these points in the discussion earlier. Others identified strongly with these efforts: “it links me with a part of the community which operates in a far healthier and more ethical way than the wider economic community”, reported one customer, and another stated “I generally find supermarkets unappealing and feel [it is valuable to do] anything I can to prevent the homogenisation of food … i.e. shopping at organic/fair trade stalls and shops.” Embodying this whole system approach, another survey respondent wrote “the basics of life must be made and grown locally. If I can’t make or grow for myself, I should at least enable others to do so in the area. I do not want to support large companies, air freight, or water and land misuse. Buying local organic helps me not to”, and another wanted to support “a farming system that works within environmental/resource limits”. These remarks display a motivation which goes beyond accessing good food, to encompass redefining the infrastructural systems of food provision and socially ‘embedding’ economic relationships around localised food supply chains and networks (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997).

Finally, institutional consumption makes up a large part of societal consumption, but is not normally within the range of individual consumers to influence, and is overlooked by mainstream sustainable consumption strategies. Eostre aims to supply public sector catering through schools and hospitals, in order to address this hidden sector, but the policy infrastructure around public procurement currently inhibits efforts to introduce local organic produce to schools or hospitals catering. Eostre spent several months developing the public procurement aspect of their work, and have made small inroads, but decided it was not going to be viable business within current policy regimes, so turned attention to other priorities. The government currently advises schools to consider alternative suppliers, but organic local food will not get into schools on any large scale until there are government directives instructing that schools must use organic local produce. Eostre felt that the existing supply chains have been in place for so long, there was no incentive to change them, and there was resistance in public sector organisations to new approaches to food. In particular, they felt that organics were still seen as ‘alternative’ to many people in positions of power, and that a pro-active push from
government would be needed in order to achieve significant changes in these institutions. Introducing localised food supply chains into this institution would require changes in the infrastructure within these institutions. A concrete example of this is found within the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital, the largest in the county, which serves Eostre’s fresh produce in its visitor and staff canteen, but has no kitchen to prepare fresh food for the 2250 meals a day it serves to its patients (NNUH, 2004). Public sector catering could be an enormous market for local organic produce, but only if public policy began to reflect these priorities and insist on building them into its infrastructure (Morgan and Morley, 2002). Provision (or not) of a kitchen to feed patients is a decision made at the planning stages of a building project, and has implications for patients health and wellbeing, as well as for the options available for managers to implement alternative arrangements (Sustainable Development Commission, 2004). If these obstacles could be overcome and public sector infrastructure put in place to enable this type of change, there is a huge potential for initiatives such as this to transform local markets, particularly with regards to local organic food supply chains, as well as provide strong leadership from government about desirable consumption patterns.

6. Conclusions

Sustainable consumption is gaining in currency as a new environmental policy objective, comprising motivated consumers and market transformation, but this mainstream approach has serious limitations: despite calling on the public to make consumption choices with sustainability in mind, the government does not address such actions as being ‘citizenly’ or political, preferring a model based on individual consumer preferences as the unit of activity. This paper has applied ‘new economics’ theory to develop a model of ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption, which is here understood to mean redefining social infrastructure and systems of provision to enable a reduction in consumption levels and hence a reduced ecological footprint. In search of new instruments and social contexts to realise this model, Dobson’s theory of ecological citizenship (2003) was discussed as a potential innovative route to sustainable consumption. Findings from an empirical study of a local organic food network were presented to uncover the relationships between ecological citizenship and sustainable consumption in practice, and to test the utility of Dobson’s theory.

The paper began with a hypothesis: namely that ecological citizenship could be an innovative new force to motivate sustainable consumption, and that such motivations might be expressed through purchasing food from local organic food networks. Having reviewed the activities and discussed the motivations of the participants of one such network—Eostre Organics—three things become apparent. The first is that Eostre—as envisaged and practised by its creators and users—is an alternative sustainable food initiative rather than a mainstream project, and that it overcomes the five significant limitations of mainstream sustainable consumption models. Furthermore, it is effectively developing new social and economic institutions for sustainable consumption. The alternative model of sustainable consumption demands localisation and re-embedding the economy within social networks, and Eostre is a good example of how this might work in practice. It uses food as a mechanism for community-building and social cohesion, while delivering sustainable rural livelihoods and a channel for the expression of alternative values about society, environment and the economy.

Secondly, the values and principles expressed by both creators and users of this local organic food network are strongly resonant with ecological citizenship, and a strong environmental ethic is a significant—if not primary—motivation for many of the participants. They sought to express preferences which were at odds with market price signals, they demonstrated a clear commitment to justice and fairness in trading relationships, to reducing ecological footprints through localising food systems and reducing packaging waste, and sought to make links of solidarity between producer and consumer, regardless of geographical distance. Furthermore, many participants saw their everyday consumption decisions as being deeply political, and enjoyed the expression of values—and small changes brought about—as a result of this quotidian political activity.

And thirdly, the relationship between ecological citizenship, local organic food networks and sustainable consumption depicted in Fig. 1 above is found to be inadequate to portray the dynamic relationships uncovered in the empirical study. An amended version is presented in Fig. 3, showing an additional causal relationship: namely the influence that local organic food networks have on promoting ecological citizenship and then providing a means for their expression. Indeed, many participants used the language and vocabulary of ecological citizenship when explaining their motivations: reducing ecological footprints and cutting consumption were commonly cited, in addition to more personal health and safety reasons.

![Fig. 3. Amended diagram showing relationships between ecological citizenship, local organic food networks and sustainable consumption.](image-url)
In terms of Dobson’s theory of ecological citizenship, we can say that Eostre and its consumers are behaving as ‘good ecological citizens’, and this citizenship model has proved a valuable analytical tool to understanding their values and motivations in a way which conventional theories of citizenship—neglecting citizenly activity taken in the private realm, and that which begets responsibilities to people beyond the nation state—do not. Similarly, it bridges the analytical divide commonly placed between ‘citizen’ and ‘consumer’ preferences (Sagoff, 1988), to describe activities which derive from citizenly urges, but which take place in the consumer sphere—the bedrock of sustainable consumption. Having tested the theory against an empirical study, ecological citizenship is therefore found to be a valuable theoretical model, and may indeed be a useful route to achieving a transition to deeper, ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption through a personal commitment to global environmental and social justice rather than top-down restrictions.

These findings suggest two fruitful areas for further work. First, more research is needed to identify the conditions under which ecological citizenship is developed and how it might be nurtured, how ecological citizens act in other areas of their lives and what their impact might be upon sustainable consumption, and how policy might enable it to flourish through the growth of initiatives such as the one discussed here. Secondly, the empirical study has highlighted some issues for the development of ecological citizenship theory: if we divest ourselves of the citizen—consumer dichotomy in an integrative ecological citizen model, how do we account for the trade-offs between ecological citizenly and ‘un-ecological citizenly’ preferences inevitably experienced by individuals? And what are the processes by which actions in the private realm translate into collective activities? It is by no means clear that this link is inevitable, and so more work is needed to uncover the pathways for this route for change.

Taking a wider perspective, the lessons from this research into an alternative sustainable consumption initiative are clear. There is a need—and desire—for diversity in social innovation and infrastructure in order for societies to develop resilience and adaptability to change—whether that be economic, social or environmental change. The innovation studied here is a specific grassroots response to the impacts of economic globalisation, but it addresses environmental and social vulnerability too. These responses are multi-dimensional, and create space for the expression of different sets of values, objectives and motivations than is possible within the conventional economy. As such, they are valuable experimental niches (Smith, 2005), and they are the repository of some of the more radical transformative impulses for sustainable consumption. Hassanein (2003) discusses the tension between individual quotidian political acts with regards to food consumption within the current systems of provision (reforms), and the large-scale collaborative action required to transform or recreate those systems (radical transformation). She concludes that a pragmatic democracy is needed to unite diverse actors and build coalitions among alternative food movements. Here, we can see that ecological citizenship bridges the divide between individual and collective action. It motivates private consumption choices, but at the same time speaks to a need for collective action to build new social infrastructure. With appropriate tools and social contexts, initiatives such as the local food cooperative discussed here might just offer new opportunities for expressing ecological citizenship and transforming the economy towards sustainable consumption.

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