

Supermarkets

Love them or loathe them, supermarkets are highly convenient and the majority of the British public uses them regularly. They hold a central place in the retail economy and have a great deal of power – over producers, consumers, and the way food is farmed and transported. While some supermarkets are a destructive influence, others are making significant efforts to use their power more benignly and conduct their business in an ethical manner.

A HUGE POWER

For every £1 of household expenditure around 49p is spent in supermarkets. And of this, 33p is spent in just the four largest supermarket groups (Asda, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco). So, for the ethical shopper, the choice of supermarket is probably one of the most crucial decisions to make.

The first supermarkets as we know them today opened in the 19th century, when the Co-operative Movement formed a group of local retailers. Today the UK shopping landscape looks quite different, with 80 per cent of grocery shopping being done in supermarkets. As William Moyes, Director General of the British Retail Consortium, said: 'Let's be honest, life without supermarkets would be hell... What used to take all day now takes a couple of hours.' With better value, more choice and more convenience, no wonder British consumers seem to be in love with supermarkets. But however much we try to ignore it, this convenience comes at a cost.

SLOW PROGRESS

There can be no doubt that in some areas supermarkets have made a lot of progress, although this in no way excuses them for the problems they create. The four product areas below have increased in availability as a result of support from supermarkets, which have the selling power to move an alternative brand into the mainstream market. In each case, however, consumer demand has had a huge effect in getting the changes made.

1 More fair trade products

All supermarkets now sell some fair trade products – products which give a fairer price to farmers and producers in the developing world. Furthermore, most of them also have their own fair trade brands.

2 More organic products

The Soil Association says that 'our health is directly connected to the health of the food we eat, ultimately to the health of the soil'. Organic farming refers to the growing of

SUPERMARKETS WHICH SELL OWN BRAND FAIR TRADE PRODUCTS:

- Co-op
- Morrison's
- Sainsbury's
- Somerfield
- Tesco
- Waitrose

food crops without the use of synthetic chemical pesticides or fertilisers. Pests are controlled by cultivation techniques and the use of pesticides derived from natural sources. Organic farmers may use seven out of the hundreds of pesticides available. Moreover, animals are reared without the routine use of drugs, antibiotics and wormers, common in intensive livestock farming.

In response to growing consumer concern about the quality of the food they eat, big retailers have made real efforts to provide a wider range of organic products.

Today the Co-op is considered the largest organic 'farmer' in the UK. Sainsbury's has received its third award from the Soil Association for being best organic retailer. Both received Soil Association approval for their own-brand products.

3 Putting a stop to GM

Genetically modified (GM) foods are foods produced using plant or animal ingredients that have been modified using gene technology. The British public are anxious about the use of GM foods because their effects on human health are unknown. Also, releasing genetically altered organisms into the environment could disrupt ecosystems, and genetically modified crops have been proved to be more harmful to many groups of wildlife than their conventional equivalent.

The major supermarkets have reacted to consumers' opposition to genetically modified food and have taken measures to reduce the number of products containing GMOs. All major supermarket chains now store non-GM products, and Marks & Spencer have a non-GM policy on the whole range of their products.

4 More vegetarian products

Some people choose a vegetarian diet for religious, ethical or environmental reasons, or to save money. Others switch to a plant-based diet for health reasons. A vegetarian diet generally contains less total fat, saturated fat and cholesterol and includes more dietary fibre. Vegetarians have lower rates of some cancers, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and type-2 diabetes. The vegetable kingdom provides all the vitamins, minerals, proteins, carbohydrates and fats needed for the human diet, although it is important to watch what you eat to be sure of getting the nutrients from vegetables that you miss from animal foods.

Most people become vegetarians out of concern for animal welfare. The green pastures and pastoral barnyard scenes of years past have been replaced by windowless metal warehouses, wire cages and gestation crates in the factory farms of today. On factory farms, animals often spend their entire lives confined to cages or stalls barely larger than their own bodies. And death for these animals doesn't always come quickly or painlessly.

Today, it is possible to find a good range of vegetarian products in our supermarket aisles. Compared to Europe, the UK has quite an advanced approach to labelling their products as suitable for vegetarians.

LOCAL PROBLEMS

In 1985, there were over 23,000 high street butchers. By 2005, there were only 9,000. At the beginning of 2001, small newsagents were closing at the rate of one per day. Our love affair with out-of-town supermarkets means that town centres are shrinking, high streets are disappearing, and, as a result, community life is under serious threat.

It has been reported that the opening of a supermarket leads to an average loss of 276 jobs in local shops, despite claims by the supermarkets that an opening offers new positions to local communities. While Asda and Sainsbury both claim to have created 10,000 jobs during 2002, there is no getting away from the fact that the arrival of these stores led to local shops closing down. If that were not enough, supermarkets have now opened smaller stores on the high street, pitching themselves directly against independent shops. These developments are not always welcomed: the website www.tescopoly.org lists dozens of campaigns against proposed new Tesco superstores, including one in Sheringham, Norfolk, that has been going for over ten years.

POOR TREATMENT OF FARMERS AND PRODUCERS

In order to achieve their economic advantage, supermarkets promote industrial farming: mass production means lower prices per unit. Supermarkets use their power to knock down producers on price; so much so that farmers are frequently paid less than what it costs to produce their goods. It costs a small farmer on average 22p per litre to produce milk, but industrially produced milk

costs 17.6p per litre, so supermarkets agree to buy only at this price. This induces losses for small farmers and extra profits for supermarkets who sell milk for 35p per litre on the shelf.

Therefore, only farmers producing in large quantities can survive. Farmers are in an extremely weak bargaining position, having to accept prices lower than the costs endured. Supermarkets can dictate how, where, when and for how much their food is produced, packaged and delivered. According to Corporate Watch, supermarkets 'employ researchers to discover precisely what the average cost of production is for a particular product world-wide, then conduct auctions, buying only when the price has fallen to the lowest'. This behaviour forces farmers and producers to sell at a low price, as they do not know what price other producers are offering. This particularly threatens producers of perishable goods, who have to sell before their products go off.

In short, supermarkets are killing off many small-scale British farms by forcing them to sell animals, crops or produce for less than they are worth. They are displaying anti-competitive practices, and are linked with the closing-down of livestock markets.

In his book *Captive State*, writer George Monbiot illustrates this point with a case study of farmers in Brecon. He argues that, while supermarkets offer 'improved choice', turning nine local butchers into one big out-of-town supermarket definitely is not an 'increase in choice'. He also refers to the underhand behaviour of supermarket chain owners when dealing with local mayors or opposition campaigners, describing them as 'experts at the art of strategic payment'.

FOOD MILES

Environmentalists have long been concerned about food miles – the distance food has travelled to get to your plate. Now there is greater awareness of this, and today's shoppers are confronted with the 'food miles dilemma': do you choose a packet of organic beans imported from Africa, helping a local farmer overseas, but which came to England on an aircraft emitting tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere? This transportation also leads to extra packaging, and means the food has been chemically treated to keep it fresh during the journey. What is even more nonsensical is when, thanks to tax-free aviation fuel, we import food we could easily grow ourselves.

The oddities of the global market, and our demand for exotic foods, can lead to ridiculous situations. In 1997, 126 million litres of cow's milk was imported into the UK at the same time as 270 million litres was exported. Animals suffer from our desire to have all products available everywhere; they often have to be carried alive for hundreds of miles before they are slaughtered.

Another economic issue linked with food miles is 'just-in-time' food management. It is an operations approach whereby food is rushed to superstores only when it is needed, to save on expensive storage. This leads to refrigerated trucks doing frequent daily return journeys to farms, only collecting some of the merchandise, with a resultant increase in pollution.

Sustain, an organisation campaigning for ethical farming, warns that as road freight increases and more and more people drive to out-of-town supermarkets, it is even more important to reduce the number of miles travelled by our food. It would like to see the end of air-freighted food altogether.

Tips for your next shopping trip:

- Buy from the supermarket whose ethical policies you believe in
- Use local shops as much as possible
- Look for fair trade, organic and Ethical Company Organisation accredited products



- Co-op
- Marks & Spencer
- Sainsbury's
- Waitrose



- Morrisons
- Somerfield
- Tesco



- Asda
- Budgens
- Iceland

SUPERMARKETS BRAND NAME	ENVIRONMENT			ANIMALS			PEOPLE			OTHER			Company group	
	ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT	GM	ORGANIC	NUCLEAR POWER	ANIMAL WELFARE	WORKER'S RIGHTS	POLITICAL DONATIONS	ARMAMENTS	FAIR TRADE	BOYCOTT	PUBLIC RECORD CRITICISMS	E.C.O. ACCREDITATION		ETHICAL COMPANY INDEX
ASDA	○	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	33	Wal-Mart
BUDGENS	○	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	59	Musgrave Group Plc
CO-OP	○	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	79	Co-operative Group
ICELAND	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	63	Baugur Group
MARKS & SPENCER	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	●	88	Marks & Spencer Group
MORRISONS	○	○	○	●	●	○	●	○	○	●	●	●	67	W M Morrison Supermarkets Plc
SAINSBURY'S	●	○	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	79	J Sainsbury Plc
SOMERFIELD	○	○	○	●	●	○	●	●	○	●	●	●	67	Somerfield Plc
TESCO	●	○	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	67	Tesco Plc
WAITROSE	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	79	John Lewis Partnership

Key

- Top rating
- Middle rating
- Bottom rating

Source: The Ethical Company Organisation 2005/2006

NB Asda has been given the bottom rating for GM, organic and Fairtrade because it failed to respond to our requests for information. Budgens has been given the bottom rating for GM because it failed to supply information on its GM policy.

THE WELL-TRAVELLED SUNDAY LUNCH

Source: Corporate Watch

Chicken from Thailand	10,691	miles by ship
Runner beans from Zambia	4,912	miles by plane
Carrots from Spain	1,000	miles by lorry
Mangetout from Zimbabwe	5,130	miles by plane
Potatoes from Italy	1,521	miles by lorry
Sprouts from Britain	125	miles by lorry
TOTAL	26,234	MILES

If you choose products that are in season and purchase them locally at a farmers' market, you could reduce the total journey from 26,234 to just 376 miles!