

100 Miles of Illinois: A Locavores Challenge

In recent years, a trend has been sweeping across the United States known as the local food movement. The local food movement is an effort being made by many Americans to purchase foods that are produced in or near their communities. An example of this movement, the 100 Mile Diet, is an effort to eat only foods produced within a 100 mile radius of where one lives. The 100 Mile Diet has many benefits. Because you are generally eating only fresh, locally produced foods, your meals include less junk food, processed fats, sugars and additives (“100 Mile Diet”). Aside from these health and lifestyle benefits, many people are turning to the 100 Mile Diet because of how it positively affects local communities. The 100 Mile Diet benefits local business and helps to create a stronger sense of community (“100 Mile Diet”). Because the dieter is only buying foods within a 100 mile radius of where they live, their money is going directly to the farmers and producers in that region, helping the area economically (“100 Mile Diet”). They are also able to create a personal relationship with the farmer who grows their food, instead of the faceless exchange at the super market.

In theory, the 100 Mile Diet should work just about anywhere, and with the Midwest being considered the “breadbasket” of the United States eating locally here seems like it would be simple. When the 100 Mile Diet is applied to my hometown, Bloomington, Illinois, the boundaries to the north are Naperville and in the south Effingham. The radius goes as far as Otterbein, Indiana in the east, and Macomb in the west. This area is comprised of mainly flat, commercial farmland with the Illinois River cutting through the upper northwest corner. Other major rivers include the Peoria River and the Mackinaw River. The major cities of distribution within the 100 mile radius are Champaign, Decatur, Peoria, and Springfield. Other communities within the area are generally small and rural. Large scale production crops grown in this area are primarily corn, wheat, and soybeans. In an area consisting of rural farmland communities it would appear at first glance that eating purely locally would be possible, and even easy. However, this is unfortunately not the case. Due to a lack of crop diversity and foods needed for healthy nutrition, excessive costs, travel and preparation time, and the unavailability of many important foods, I could not healthily feed myself on the 100 Mile Diet in the Bloomington, Illinois area.

In order for the 100 Mile Diet to be considered a success it must meet the nutritional guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as well as provide the basic foods I personally consume on a regular basis. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S.DA. suggest that the average American should consume approximately two cups of fruit per day, two and a half cups of vegetables per day, three ounces of grain-product per day, three cups of fat-free or low fat dairy product, and a portion of low-fat protein, such as chicken or beans (USHHS). My personal daily food regimen includes some kind of fruit, granola and a cup of coffee for breakfast, a sandwich with chicken or tuna for lunch, and a glass of milk with a medium portioned salad for dinner. Of course, this routine can vary, but in order for the 100 Mile Diet to be considered feasible to my daily life it would need to meet the recommendations set by the USDA and U.S Department of Health and Human Services, as well as mostly go along with my daily routine.

In order to meet these nutritional and personal dietary guidelines I would not be able to depend solely on large scale commercial crop production in my area. The only food crops that are largely commercially produced within my 100 miles are soybeans and wheat (NASS). While corn is a major crop in the area, sweet corn, which is what is used for consumer dietary consumption, is not produced in or around Bloomington. Also, while wheat and soybeans are grown and produced within my area, it is very difficult to determine whether or not the wheat and soybeans sold in the local supermarket are actually from the immediate area. The crops could be shipped to other areas, and Illinois supermarkets do not have to specify where exactly the food on their shelves comes from. If one were to try to eat only foods that were produced locally for large scale commercial use within the 100 miles around Bloomington, they would be missing key aspects in their diet.

Because of this, in order to have any success in the 100 Mile Diet, one would have to purchase foods from farmers' markets and Community Supported Agriculture farms, or CSAs. The city of Bloomington holds a farmers' market in the downtown area from May to October every Saturday from 7:30am to 12pm (*Downtown Bloomington Farmers' Market*). Here, one can purchase a variety of fruits and vegetables as well as some varieties of dairy products. Farmers' markets are a fantastic way to support Bloomington's local economy, and directly benefits the

farmer (*Downtown Bloomington Farmers' Market*). Purchasing produce and dairy here would also go along with the 100 Mile Diet's idea of helping foster a closer bond of consumer and farmer.

There are many Community Supported Agriculture farms within a 100 mile radius of Bloomington, Illinois. Three of these, Prairieland CSA in Champaign, Green Earth Institute in Naperville, and Plow Creek Farm in Tiskilwa, could potentially supply someone with enough fresh vegetable and fruit produce to allow them to live on the 100 Mile Diet. Along with this, the three farms do not use large scale production techniques, and try to make as little impact on the environment as possible. The Green Earth Institute in Naperville works with schools in the area to provide healthier, fresher, and local meals for the students (Green Earth CSA). These aspects make these farms quite appealing to many socially and environmentally conscious consumers, and assures the consumer that they will be getting a high quality, organic and fresh product.

All three CSAs provide the basic vegetable products I need, such as lettuce, tomatoes, spinach, carrots, and peas. These would help me to meet the vegetable guidelines set by the USDA, as well as coincide with my daily "salad for dinner" routine. The three also provide wheat and flour that could be used to bake bread, fulfilling my personal grain needs. Plow Creek Farm meets some of the nutritional needs for fruit with their production a variety of different fruits, such as strawberries and blackberries (Plow Creek Farm). They also grow and sell many different herbs, such as basil, cilantro, and garlic, which would be used in cooking (Plow Creek Farm). Prairieland CSA helps fulfill some protein needs with their production of dry, edible beans (Prairieland CSA).

Meeting the protein recommendations set when eating locally in my area is a bit more challenging than simply meeting fruit, vegetable, and grain needs. Between April and October, it is feasible to fish for food in Lake Bloomington and Lake Evergreen, both within a 30 minute drive of the city of Bloomington. In these lakes, it is possible to catch and prepare Channel Catfish, Crappie, Largemouth Bass, Muskellunge, Striped and Hybrid Bass, Walleye, Sauger and Saugeye ("Fishing in Illinois").

Luckily for those who do not have the time or skills to fish, commercial fishing is an important industry in Illinois ("Fishing in Illinois"). Along the Illinois River, there are fish

markets open from April to October, however, these are becoming more scarce. It is possible to procure locally caught fish from a fish market, but it is somewhat difficult. Due to an “increased demand from wider markets” many of the fisheries along with Illinois River are beginning to export their fish to larger cities like Chicago (“Fishing in Illinois”).

While the existence of the community supported agriculture farms and the availability of fish would certainly make it seem easier to eat locally in the Bloomington, Illinois area, it is still not a realistic diet. Within the Bloomington area, there is very limited animal product production (NASS). Livestock production is the smallest commodity in the region in terms of market value, and dairy products, beef, and pork are not produced in a large enough quantity to properly sustain the population. Poultry, in fact, is not even raised in the area (NASS). Dry, edible beans are not largely harvested within the 100 mile region, as well (NASS). If one tried to eat purely locally in this region, the result would be a major loss of protein and dairy in their diet, which is not in anyway considered healthy.

Along with a loss dairy and protein, I would be missing many of the simple food pleasures I tend to enjoy in my daily life. Every morning, I drink at least one cup of coffee. In this coffee, I add milk and sugar. If I were to try to eat only within the 100 miles surrounding Bloomington, I could not engage in this routine. Neither coffee or sugar are produced locally where I live. Cocoa beans are also not produced in this area, so I would not be able to enjoy foods like chocolate. I would also be missing key ingredients, such as salt, in my diet. While these foods are not necessarily essential to my diet, they do fulfill a certain “quality of life” aspect that I would sorely miss.

Another problem with eating locally, apart from the dietary issues and lack of products I regularly enjoy, is cost. While the food itself is generally not much more expensive than what you could buy at the super market, the real cost is in transportation. Transportation to and from farmers’ markets and CSAs could be quite costly. From Bloomington to the Prairieland CSA in Champaign it is a one hour and 57 minute drive. From Bloomington to Plow Creek Farm in Tiskilwa it is a one hour and 42 minute drive. From Bloomington to the Green Earth Institute in Naperville it is a two hour and six minute drive. This back and fourth would rack up a serious gas bill, and could also prove to be harmful to the environment.

Time also factors in as a problem to this 100 Mile Diet. Because I would not be eating commercially produced, ready made products, such as white bread available for purchase at any super market, much of my time would be spent preparing meals. I would have to personally prepare bread and fish to fulfill the wheat and protein requirements of my diet. I would spend my weekends shopping at farmers' markets or making the hour long, and possibly longer, trek to a CSA to buy food. Next would be the difficult task of actually preparing all the meals. Cooking breakfast, lunch, and dinner would take a large amount of time out of each day.

Perhaps the biggest problem with eating within my area would be availability. Illinois is known for its harsh winters. Hardly anything can grow from November to late March because of the freezing temperatures and frequent occurrence of snow. During these months, fruits and vegetables produced by local farmers become scarce, and people living in my area must purchase vegetables produced in warmer climates and shipped to the local supermarket. Storage for crops like broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, lettuce, and tomatoes is only possible for one to two weeks before they begin to rot (Trinklein). While it is possible for some of these products, like beans and peas, to be frozen, they tend to lose their nutritional value through this process (Trinklein). It would be challenging, and unwise, to get out on a lake and fish, so I would suffer from a serious loss of protein during the winter months. Eating locally during this time period would be difficult and quite unhealthy.

Eating within a 100 mile radius of Bloomington, Illinois would not be a feasible lifestyle for someone like myself, and especially not for an entire population. While there is no overwhelmingly large ethnic group present in Bloomington, there are enough people who practice Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism that the diet would not be realistic as a whole. In Judaism and Shia Islam, it is against the traditional practice to eat bottom-feeding fish, such as catfish, which is one of the most populous species of fish in Lake Bloomington and Lake Evergreen ("Fishing in Illinois"). Because of this, these groups would not be getting the proper amount of protein in their diets. To eat on the 100 Mile Diet in Bloomington would also involve omitting many of the important cultural foods to these religions, such as lamb, gefilte fish, and lox, as well as many spices.

If everyone in the city of Bloomington and the surrounding area were to stop buying foods from the supermarket and start purchasing from the local CSAs or fishing in the lakes or even going out and harvesting their own foods, the cost to the environment would be immeasurable. If every family in Bloomington made the hour and a half long drive to one of the three aforementioned CSAs even just three times a month, there would be an amazing excess amount of carbon released into the air due to their travel. The CSAs and local farms would be forced to increase production to meet the raising demand, putting pressure on and changing the natural form of the land with increased agricultural practices. Over-harvesting would occur seriously impacting the environment.

This diet, if practiced by an entire community, would impact animal life as well. As I mentioned before, it would be possible to meet some of the protein guidelines set by the USDA by fishing in the local lakes. However, if everyone did this the fish populations in these areas would become overfished and would face extinction.

Setting aside the damage this diet would cause to the environment, the 100 Mile Diet is not realistic in Bloomington, Illinois because it cannot meet basic dietary needs. There is simply no way that the fish of Lake Bloomington and Lake Evergreen could provide enough protein to feed a population of 75,000 people. It would be impossible for three CSAs and a farmers' market to provide enough fresh produce to the population without first seriously harming the environment. The population would also suffer tremendously during the winter months, when even less fresh and local food is available. This diet could not meet the needs of an entire population.

Eating locally is important. It helps the local economy and is usually healthier for the individual. While it is important to support local business, it should not be done at a cost to the environment and your health. In some areas, it is unwise to eat exclusively foods produced locally. In Bloomington, Illinois there are many options to those wanting to add more locally produced foods into their diet. However, because of a lack of availability of many nutritious foods and crop diversity, cost, time, and the harsh winter season, it is difficult and unhealthy to eat solely locally produced foods in Bloomington, Illinois.

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