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Uprooting the organic claims

By Simon Cox
Presenter, The Investigation

Sales of organic produce are booming on the back of alleged benefits to our health and the environment, as well as claims of higher standards of animal welfare. But are we being seduced by "feel good" claims that don't stand up to scientific scrutiny?



Borough Market in South London is the granddaddy of farmers markets. On a Wednesday lunchtime there is a big queue at the organic salad bar. Next door there's a steady stream of customers at Betty's organic stall stocking up on organic herbs and spices.

For many consumers, there's a belief that eating organic will improve their health. It's one Betty supports.

"Given a choice would you eat something that is covered in artificial chemicals to something that is natural and clean?"

Can we prove that organic is better for our health?

The Soil Association, Britain's largest certifying body for organic produce, claims there "is a growing body of research that shows organic food can be more nutritious for you". And there have been some recent studies to back this up, showing higher levels of vitamins in organic kiwi fruits and tomatoes.

This intrigued Clare Williamson from the British Nutrition Foundation who decided to study all the current research on the comparative health benefits of organic and non-organic food.

“ Science doesn't tell us the answers so some of it we have to go on feelings ”

Lord Peter Melchett
Soil Association

The organic lobby's claims failed to convince her. The BNF "feel it would be irresponsible to promote organic food over non organic food as being better for you as there is not enough strong evidence," Ms Williamson says of her findings.

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The government and its independent watchdog, the Food Standards Agency are equally adamant there is no proof organic food is better for our health. But science alone cannot prove the point, says Lord Peter Melchett, a director of the Soil Association, who believes consumers must trust their instincts.

"Science doesn't tell us the answers so some of it we have to go on feelings," he says.

One fact that can't be disputed is that organic farming uses far fewer pesticides than conventional agriculture. The Soil Association's booklet *Organic Food and Farming: Myth and Reality*, is clear what this means: "pesticides have a harmful impact on human health".

Natural pesticides

So organic must be better for your health as it rarely uses pesticides... Currently the amount of pesticide residues on fruit and vegetables isn't high enough to harm us, says the Food Standards Agency.

And Professor Anthony Trewevas, an expert in plant and molecular biology, believes the argument against pesticides is disingenuous and simplistic since we are already eating huge numbers of natural toxic pesticides which plants use to kill off insects.



We eat thousands of natural pesticides a day, says Anthony Trewevas

"All of us on average consume several thousand a day," says to Professor Trewevas, who estimates this amounts to a quarter of a teaspoon a day. These natural pesticides don't adversely affect us, he says.

"You do not come out in tumours; you do not become sick from nerve toxins."

But buying organic isn't just about health, for many people it's about helping to save the planet. Sheepdrove farm in Berkshire is an idyllic picture of rural life. Sheep and cattle graze on some of the 2,000 acres of rolling hills, while below them chickens roam freely.

Laurence Woodward, director of the nearby Elm Farm Organic Research centre, believes Sheepdrove is a perfect advert for the environmental benefits of organic farming.

"There is no question that organic farming is better for the environment than conventional farming, there is mounting evidence from government studies," he says.

Bad science

But, as with the health claims, can we prove organic really is better for the planet?

That's exactly what the government and organisations like the Soil Association have been trying to find out. Earlier this year, Ken Green, professor of environmental management at Manchester University Business School, was commissioned by the government to conduct the first comprehensive study of the environmental impact of food production.



Few studies have analysed environmental benefits of organic farming

His findings weren't good news for the organic industry. "The studies that exist show there is not a clear cut thing that says let's go organic and that will have a big environmental impact compared to traditional methods of farming," says Mr Green, summarising his findings.

The organic lobby rounded on the study accusing it of bad science because it was only a "literature review" rather one based on original research. But Lord Melchett, readily concedes there are "still some big gaps in our knowledge about this". He is confident future research will prove organic is better for the environment.

But few studies have actually tried to analyse the environmental benefits of organic farming. Mr Woodward believes there's a good reason for this: "It's almost impossible to do a sensible comparison of organic and conventional farming systems. The systems are so different".

Welfare standards

Yet this hasn't stopped bodies like the Soil Association from claiming that "Organic farming is friendlier to the environment".

Who says so? According to the Soil Association's website, the government does. "The UK government has said that it (organic farming) is better for wildlife, causes lower pollution from sprays, produces less carbon dioxide - the main global warming gas."



How good are conditions for organically-reared livestock abroad?

But challenged on this, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, not surprisingly, says it doesn't favour one form of farming over another.

Not all organic consumption is about saving the earth. It is

about rearing and caring for livestock more humanely. We have uncovered evidence of serious concerns from insiders about the way some organic meat is produced.

Laurence Woodward, who led a study to be published later this year, says conditions at some pig farms in Holland were not "organic" since "they are kept indoors, in cramped conditions.

"It's very much conventional, very intensive," he says.

What of the consumers who buy this meat? "There is no other way of saying it - they being conned," says Mr Woodward. The research didn't identify which of the UK's certifying bodies was approving these overseas products.

But when it comes to endorsing organic produce from overseas, the Soil Association, for one, doesn't send its inspectors directly. Rather "what we do is inspect the inspectors and make sure they are going to inspect to our standards," says Lord Melchett.

Being an ethical consumer was never going to be easy. The politics of produce is confusing and getting more complicated each day. The best advice, don't believe simple labels that promise the earth but without the science to back it up.

The Investigation is broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on Thursday 26 April at 2000 BST.

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Not to mention the fact that organic farming is far less efficient and requires far more time and land to cultivate an identical crop meaning it is wasteful and a poor use of the limited land we have available for farming.

Andy, Romford, Essex

The reason the government can't officially agree that organic food is better is because it is more expensive. If it admitted it was better then how would the vast majority of people who can't afford all organic diets feel, knowing that they're eating substandard food. They would demand price controls or other drastic measures, and that's a position the government can't fall into.

Tariq Rashid, London

Better to look for free-range than organic when it comes to animal products (though both if possible) not because it's better for us but because it's better for them; better to look for organic on plant products, not because it's better for us but because it's better for the unfortunate labourers working with toxic chemicals and it's longterm better for the environment. We aren't all of us so selfish that we do everything simply for our own individual benefit !

jacqueline staniforth, croydon surrey

The suggestion from Professor Anthony Trewevas that pesticides aren't harmful because we eat thousands of natural pesticides is ridiculous. We have been eating these plants for thousands of years and our bodies have adapted to them. But our bodies have no defences against the artificial pesticides created by chemists.

Patrick , Leeds, UK

Of course organic is better for you, farm animals & the environment. The argument for chemical pesticides being ok, because of natural pesticides is ridiculous. As they aren't nasty synthetic petrochemicals. I agree tho. We are being conned in the supermarket for organics, as it's mostly foreign. Recently I have given up on factory farmed meat & only buy organic & free range. Hopefully the animals are treated better...hmmmm..

justin, london

It does not matter a damn if organics are better for us individually although I believe they are. The point about organics is that they do not involve any use of chemicals, no pollution of the soil or water courses. Just consider the huge costs we all have to pay to the water companies to remove all the chemicals the farmers put on the land. Not only that but those same chemicals are in part oil based and require delivery .

Alan Paterson, Wrexham, UK

You should address the issue of productivity per hectare. Since organic farming is so much less productive per hectare, if we switched the majority of our farming to organic it would require land which is currently wild to be brought into cultivation.

alexa, oxford

Shame on you BBC for such biased reporting. 6 letters say it all for me; DDT & CJD. Is organic perfect? No. Is it better than intensive farming? Yes, lots.

Jim Kenney, hemel hempstead

I buy organic fruit and veg because I believe it tastes better, not because I believe it is better for me, or that it will save the planet.

Greg, Wales

Ken Green states "The studies that exist show there is not a clear cut thing that says let's go organic and that will have a big environmental impact compared to traditional methods of farming,". I was under the impression that organic farming is traditional? Modern intensive farming practices have only been around for the last 50 years or so, organic farming methods date back thousands of years, surely that makes organic traditional. The last thing the government wants to admit is that traditional organic farming is better for you, the farming lobby wouldn't stand for it.

nick, london

COMMENTS: Organic farming is bad for the environment if

looked at on a global scale. The reason is that its yields are much lower than for "conventional farming" using pesticides and fertilizers. Between 1950 and 2000 cereal production, for example, tripped whilst the area farmed increased by only 10% (source: The Economist Dec 9th 2006). If the whole world shifts to organic farming, then the area farmed will have to be tripped - destroying most if not all remaining rain forests and wildernesses. The only alternative would be for two thirds of the world's population to die. Is that what green campaigners really want?

Dale, London

I have a strong science background but, where possible, I buy organically-produced food. Why? There are two main reasons. In terms of the science, none of the studies claim pesticide use is safe. What they do say is that they have found no evidence of harm. This isn't quite the same thing. Thalidomide, if you recall, was deemed 'safe' by scientists for a long time, and British beef was infamously fed by John Gummer to his daughter to show that it was supposedly safe to eat. If it's a case of choosing to eat a plant's own pesticides (formulated and evolved over millennia) or those of a chemical laboratory who have only conducted short-term research, I'd rather stick with nature. Especially when my family are involved. The second reason is that I don't agree with scientific methods of farming. Of course a farmer can triple or quadruple his yield of chicken meat by using battery farming, and feeding his chickens with antibiotics to control disease. It might even, conceivably, be 'healthier' meat. But do I want to be involved with that? As you point out, the claims of organic produce being healthier are far from clear-cut. Typically, any health impact takes decades to determine. But I think the ethical case for organic farming is far easier to make, if you are an ethical person. Ultimately it is a lifestyle choice, in a similar way to people choosing whether or not to attend church on a Sunday or to volunteer their time for charity. There may be no scientific basis to show these improve the planet, but the majority of those taking part will tell you they feel happier for it.

Paul Robinson, Abingdon, UK

Who cares whether organic food is better for us or the environment or whatever, it tastes better.

Tim, Manchester

My friend runs a farm which breeds cattle, pigs and sheep for meat. The animals are fed on hay and naturally occurring grasses grown on the farm and are not fed anything dried or reconstituted. The animals are happy and well cared for. However it is not an organic farm. You really would not want to eat organic meat, for one thing it would be riddled with worms and secondly the term "organic" is open to wide interpretation. For example, paper waste products dug into farmland to fertilise it is termed "organic". Whilst it may have started off as trees it has been through a great deal of processing and, inevitably, picked up other material on its way!

Elaine Brown, Redhill, Surrey

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