



# EarthMatters Salon Series

Active, personally relevant learning is at the heart of an effective education. This salon series takes participants through a process of exploring sustainability through shared discovery and personal reflection designed to help shape the way we think and act.

**From “The New Geopolitics of Food” by Lester R. Brown. Excerpt from original article printed in *Foreign Policy* magazine, May/June 2011.**

In the United States, when world wheat prices rise by 75 percent, as they have over the last year, it means the difference between a \$2 loaf of bread and a loaf costing maybe \$2.10. If, however, you live in New Delhi, those skyrocketing costs really matter: A doubling in the world price of wheat actually means that the wheat you carry home from the market to hand-grind into flour for chapatis costs twice as much. And the same is true with rice. If the world price of rice doubles, so does the price of rice in your neighborhood market in Jakarta. And so does the



cost of the bowl of boiled rice on an Indonesian family’s dinner table.

Welcome to the new food economics of 2011: Prices are climbing, but the impact is not at all being felt equally. For Americans, who spend less than one-tenth of their income in the supermarket, the soaring food prices we’ve seen so far this year are an annoyance, not a calamity. But for the planet’s poorest 2 billion people, who spend 50 to 70 percent of their income on food, these soaring prices may mean going from two meals a day to one... The world is losing its ability to soften the effect of shortages. In response to previous price surges, the United States, the world’s largest grain producer, was effectively able to steer the world away from potential catastrophe. From the mid-20th century until 1995, the United States had either grain surpluses or idle cropland that could be planted to rescue countries in trouble. When

## A FEW POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS

- To introduce staff or students to one another through small group dialogue.
- As an interactive way to engage employees or students in a conversation around personal connection to food choices and sustainability.
- As part of new student orientation.

## USING THIS TOOL

Read the excerpt below, and then form groups of 3-5 people, and go through the discussion questions for about 10 minutes. For the next reading/questions, create new groups if numbers warrant it.

During your discussion keep in mind these helpful tenets: Avoid judgment of others. Agreement isn’t necessary for effective dialog.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR FACULTY, STAFF AND STUDENTS

- Discussion based curricula — Please visit the Northwest Earth Institute website at [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org).
- NWEI’s Annual EcoChallenge focused on adopting new behaviors, [www.ecochallenge.org](http://www.ecochallenge.org)



Read more in *Hungry for Change: Food, Ethics and Sustainability*, NWEI’s newest guide, released Fall 2011

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the Indian monsoon failed in 1965, for example, President Lyndon Johnson's administration shipped one-fifth of the U.S. wheat crop to India, successfully staving off famine. We can't do that anymore; the safety cushion is gone. That's why the food crisis of 2011 is for real, and why it may bring with it yet more bread riots cum political revolutions. What if the upheavals that greeted dictators Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya (a country that imports 90 percent of its grain) are not the end of the story, but the beginning of it? Get ready, farmers and foreign ministers alike, for a new era in which world food scarcity increasingly shapes global politics.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What responsibility, if any, does the US (and your home community) bear in addressing food shortages in other parts of the world? Please explain.
2. What local food politics, if any, are at play in your community? Or, who are the key stakeholders and decision makers in food issues locally?
3. What changes do you foresee as being necessary and where can you intervene in local food systems?

#### **Excerpt from *The Ecology of Food* by Vanessa Barrington**

Healthy food doesn't exist in a vacuum. The idea that we can take a nutrient that has been proven in one study to lower cholesterol, increase energy, or repair cells, and then simply add it to a processed food to give that food a healthier profile is faulty...

It would be simple to advise not buying packaged food, and indeed, I have said that ... before. But ultimately, I think we need to look at food and nutrition ecologically. Each nutrient is part of a functional system and each food that we ingest is a part of the body's functional system. Beyond that, the food we eat is also part of our larger socio-economic and cultural system around food.

When I shop for food I think a lot about the different levels of nourishment in it. Does it nourish my heart, my soul? Does it nourish my pleasure centers by tasting good? Does it nourish the relationships I have with the people I'm eating with? Does it nourish the environment, or cause harm? Does it nourish the people who produce it, or exploit them?

To take an ecological view of food is to understand that the physical, cultural, social, environmental, and economic

results of ingesting a food or nutrient cannot be predicted or understood in isolation. Foods interact with one another, in the body, around the table, and in society—all of which contribute to their overall ability to nourish. None of this can be described by a marketing claim.

Next time you're shopping, instead of thinking about whether the food in your cart is going to provide you with the proper balance of Omega-3s and 6s, sufficient antioxidants to prevent cancer, or enough fiber to lower your cholesterol, think about how it will taste, who you will eat it with, how you will prepare it, where it came from, who produced it and if it's in season. In short, think about whether that food is the right thing for you to eat right now.

The marketing of functional foods is not just annoying because it takes advantage of consumer confusion and fear around nutrition, it's also dangerous because it assumes we don't have our own holistic understanding of food and, in the end, dis-empowers us to make our own decisions about what to eat.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Do you agree with Barrington's statement that we need to look at food and nutrition ecologically? Why or why not?
2. When you are food shopping, what filters do you use? (Omega-3s, antioxidants, fiber, vitamins, packaging, seasonal, local, organic, nourishment, cravings, family, etc?) Would you like to use other filters? Please describe.
3. What is one food choice that you make or could make to "nourish the environment more and cause less harm?"

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