

"Local" is not just an eco-food brand

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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The more the food movement goes mainstream, the more you hear casual descriptors like "local or organic or eco-friendly." Local becomes one of several labels that can stand in for eco-ethical food generally.

But local was never primarily about the environment, and it isn't just about food. It's about small-scale economies rooted in the particularity of place. And not just as a romantic ideal, though I'm as much of a sucker for a Wendell Berry poem as the next person. There's actual data about how much of a difference it makes to a community when people spend their money locally.

[This is an old article](#), but someone linked to it the other day and I appreciated its quick take on the subject. One element I hadn't really thought about:

According to Susan Witt, Executive Director of the E.F. Schumacher Society, "buy local" campaigns serve another function: alerting a community about gaps in the local market. For instance, if consumers keep turning to on-line or big-box stores for a particular product—say, socks—this signals an opportunity for someone local to make and sell socks. This is the way product innovations get made, says Witt.

Of course, locavore socks likely won't be cheap. On the other hand, the cheap socks I buy don't last long and don't connect me to a neighbor or support a small business. As [everyone ever](#) has naysayed, buying local doesn't (necessarily) reduce your carbon footprint. But that was never the main point in the first place.