

EDITORS' NOTE

John Larwood's essay questions the sustainability of organic and other eco-friendly products. Larwood opens his rhetorical argument by narrating a conversation he had with a friend. Who is Larwood's audience and how does his introduction draw the audience into the topic? From the beginning of the essay, could you as a reader relate to his concern? As Larwood continues to explain his issues with green labeling, how does he develop his ethos? At points within his essay, Larwood offers background information about his sources, and at other points he does not. In what ways does his research help or hinder his argument? As Larwood nears his conclusion, he offers options for us to consider. Does his use of "we" and "us" invite you as a reader to transform your way of thinking about his topic? Does Larwood's essay appeal to readers' emotions? Is an emotional appeal an effective choice for this subject matter?

Naturally Deceptive

John Larwood

A look of curiosity forms on my friend's face. "Is that the normal Dasani cap?" she asks. I glance down at my water bottle to observe the green cap adorning my blue, plastic Dasani water bottle. "Yeah, they changed it. I guess it's eco-friendly now," I reply as I inspect the bottle's label. The Dasani website confirms my conjecture: "better by design, [Dasani's PlantBottle™] is made from up to 30% plant-based materials and is still a 100% recyclable bottle." Yet, a question lingers in my mind—am I being totally duped?

Through the years, I have watched the push to 'go green' permeate the society around me. The 'go green' movement is the global campaign for reducing humanity's negative impact on the sustainability of natural resources. From the Dasani PlantBottle™ to hybrid cars, products are being tailored to attract customers who want to help our planet; companies are responding to my generation's enthusiasm for the Earth. For most products there seems to be a more sustainably-produced counterpart; instead of fried Doritos packaged in plastic, you can buy Sun Chips—baked using solar energy and packaged in compostable bags. Consumers even have a choice between wood pencils and pencils made with recycled paper. Ethically, it seems only natural to choose the recycled or compostable product when it comes time to make a decision about what to buy as a consumer. After all, if I choose to buy the conventionally produced, unsustainable (and often cheaper) item, I feel like I have personally betrayed Mother Nature and am actively contributing to her suffering.

The most familiar scene for these guilt-laden decisions is the grocery store. In every aisle, food items are strategically juxtaposed with their organic alternatives, so buying groceries turns into a gauntlet of moral decisions. The packaging of organic foods is designed to suggest natural, earth-friendly products. As with the Dasani PlantBottle™ and the Sun Chips bag, organic foods often strut their sustainability right on the packaging. The college students of today have been carefully conditioned to associate plant and sun motifs, and earthy, natural colors with organic foods. More importantly, we have been conditioned to associate organic products with environmental sensitivity. In terms of sustainability, however, the distinctions between organic and non-organic are not black and white.

From personal experience, I find that proponents of organic food tote the idea that organic farms produce food without pesticides and other pollutants, whereas conventional farms utilize pesticides and fossil fuels to a great extent. However, the benefits of the organic methods are not without their own consequences to the environment. An article from the scientific journal, *Nature*, states, “Competitive organic farmers keep their fields clear of weeds through frequent mechanical weeding—a method that damages nesting birds, worms and invertebrates—and high use of fossil fuels, which greatly increases pollution from nitrogen oxides” (Trewavas). So while pesticides are eliminated from the organic farming process, the gains are negated by the increased use of fossil fuels and damage to terrestrial habitats. The net effects of organic and conventional farming on the environment are not significantly different enough to claim a more sustainable choice.

The similarities between organic food production and conventional food production do not end with sustainability. Organic supporters protest the inhumane treatment of cattle in conventional feedlots, where cows numbering in the thousands are fed to reach their desired weight before being sent to the slaughterhouse. “Certified-organic animals on big farms and feedlots live and die under the same inhumane conditions conventionally raised animals do,” as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulations do little more than insure certified organic cows consume organic grains (Ciesinski). “Having an organic dairy mostly just requires that the cows not have antibiotics or hormones used on them . . . and have access to grass a certain number of days per year” (Sharp). Organic herds may be found on the same property as conventional herds. Though the organic herds are kept separate, their conditions are alarmingly comparable to those of conventional herds despite their organic label.

The USDA certified-organic label becomes further suspect by the USDA’s failure to certify their imported products. “In July 2008, an investigation by reporters at WJLA, an ABC news affiliate in Washington, DC, found traces of aldicarb, a highly toxic and restricted insecticide in organic ginger that was sold under natural grocery Whole Foods’ ‘365 Organic’ label” (Gross). This ginger root came from China, where USDA relies on 5 international certification agencies to insure the food meets regulation (Gross). The credibility of the ‘certified-organic’ label is lost when the food does not actually meet the standards that the label entails. If the USDA regulations are not strictly enforced, organic food can literally become no different than conventionally produced food—what then, would be the benefit of organic food?

The problem may be big corporations taking advantage of profitable loopholes in the USDA system. A recent marketing campaign from the Sara Lee Corporation seems to support this idea. Claims by the corporation suggest that their Eco-Grain is more sustainable than organic grain. The Cornucopia Institute, a farm policy research group, contends otherwise. The research group found that a loaf of Sara Lee’s Earthgrains bread only contains about 20% of the Eco-Grain flour, with the rest of the flour coming from conventional wheat—a fact that reveals how negligible the benefits of the Eco-Grains are (Cornucopia Institute). “Corporations like Sara Lee clearly want to profit from consumers’ interest in ecological and healthy food production. But . . . Sara Lee is doing practically nothing to ensure its ingredients are truly ecologically produced” (Cornucopia Institute). I imagine other well-known brands have deceptions sitting beside these loaves of Eco-Grain bread, on grocery shelves, waiting to be discovered.

Seemingly, the only alternative to large organic corporations is locally grown produce. Michael Pollan, bestselling author of *The Botany of Desire* and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, asserts, “If you have any space at all, a \$70 home garden can yield \$600 of produce. That is the cheapest, most local, most nutritious produce you can have” (“10 Questions”). Unfortunately, the cost is

likely greater than the yield. A recent study by Steve Sexton, a PhD agricultural resources student at UC Berkeley, suggests locally grown food is not as beneficial as Pollan claims. (Curlee). The production cost of locally grown food is notably greater than the production cost of food on big corporate farms. The problem is a lack of efficiency in local farming. To produce the required amount of food to feed the world with local farming, Sexton speculates the need for 214 million additional acres of land for farming. He calculates that the additional acreage and loss of efficiency will demand such a significant amount of energy that it will likely overwhelm any reduction of carbon-emissions that comes from decreased transportation and monocropping (Curlee). In the end, there is no clear improvement in sustainability offered by switching solely to local food production.

So what options do we have for sustainability then? I believe that hope lies somewhere in a combination of conventional, organic, and local production. By synergizing the efficiency of conventional production with the desire for sustainability, perhaps we can find a happy medium. The key is to build on the established methods of cheap, effective conventional farming. From this base, changes can be made with few detrimental consequences. Snack food juggernaut, Frito-Lay has shown this is possible by using solar power to operate their Sun Chips plant in Modesto. Beyond simply utilizing solar power, corporations can subsidize or assimilate local food producers to facilitate the research of sans pesticide food production. The changes are simple, but have yet to be widely adopted.

By turning a more critical eye to the products that we buy, it is not hard to see that we are indeed being duped. Only by demanding substantiated claims from manufacturers can we expect to see improvements in the way we are marketed to. For the time being, companies are able to get away with minimal efforts to appear sustainable. It is not enough that items like the Dasani PlantBottle™ are made partially of plant material. With the idea of sustainability in mind, we have to start questioning why Dasani bottles water at all when we can do away with the plastic bottle altogether by drinking from the tap. The fault does not lie with the corporations, but with us, the consumers. By not asking for better practices from the companies that produce the things we buy, we are showing how little we care. As a result, we are answered with superficial packaging changes like green bottle caps. The responsibility to push for sustainability lies on our shoulders, so it is time we asked for something more.

John Larwood is an art and design major.

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