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## Eco shopper diary: supermarket guilt



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I have a dirty eco secret. No, not my recycled sex toys and muddy, vintage garden tools -- my supermarket habit. I'm not alone. Of the £76 billion the UK blows on food each year, more than 80 per cent is spent at supermarkets. And this week I've been reading in fine detail about exactly how un-green they are -- that's Sainsbury's, Tesco, Waitrose, Morrisons, the Co-op, Somerfield and Asda -- in the [Green Grocers survey](#).

But what's so bad about supermarkets? A lot, as it turns out -- try traffic congestion, squeezing prices on organic farmers, food waste, excess packaging, air-freighted food, shoppers' car journeys and energy-guzzling stores with monster lighting and refrigeration -- and that's just for starters. Head to [Friends of the Earth's](#) supermarket briefing for more detail. Admittedly, the chains are getting better. Slowly. The Green Grocers survey promoted eco-dunces Somerfield and Morrisons from an 'E' rating in 2006 to 'D' for 2007. But it's often a case of snakes and ladders -- while Sainsbury's this year increased local produce by one per cent, its organic lines dropped from 21 to 12 per cent.

And yet, and yet... I still shop at my two local Sainsbury's. By comparison, one of the SmartPlanet team never shops in supermarkets as a point of principle. Yep, you read right -- never. And, for all I can see from her impressive lunches, she eats as well as I do, if not better. So why do I keep going? It sure ain't for the atmosphere. Strip-lighting, grumbling queues, pointy-elbowed punters and soul-crushed staff are not my idea of fun.

Clearly, my organisational skills are partly to blame. While the local grocers closes before I finish work and my 'local' farmers' markets are several miles away and only appear once a week, my local Sainsbury's is open 'til 11pm, seven days a week. It's also the closest food shop -- the biggest pull for most shoppers, even eco ones. And sometimes, I confess, I actually like the anonymity of a supermarket. Although I invariably have interesting chats at my local bakers, there are times when, well, I just want some milk on a Monday morning without the small talk.

That's not all. Despite selling mountains of apples from New Zealand, Sainsbury's labels the origin of all its fruit and veg. Even if that narrows my choice to Lincolnshire carrots and a single Kent pear, at least I know how to avoid grub freighted halfway round the globe. My grocers, by contrast, is a proper old-skool one with a wider range than Sainsbury's, but doesn't have origin labels on anything. And nothing's labelled organic. I know, I should ask, but I'd feel like a jumped-up middle-class ponce (guilty as charged, but I don't need to advertise it) interrogating the nice lady on where her plums are from. I have similar problems with my local independent shops. While I know I'm helping a small business by buying from the three newsagents nearby, I also know the milk won't be organic. Sainsbury's, meanwhile, has plenty.

Don't get me wrong -- I want to quit. I have a veg box ([Able & Cole](#), before that [Riverford](#)), work near [Borough market](#) and pick up awesome produce there, and order home deliveries via the web (whittled down to [Ocado](#) following dalliances with [Tesco.com](#) and [Sainsbury's](#)). Those deliveries could be the answer, as George Monbiot suggest in his book [Heat](#). To cut carbon emissions, he suggests we scrap supermarkets as we know them, transform all the old stores into warehouse depots and order our weekly shops via the web. Any increase in CO2 from the extra vans on the road, he argues, would easily be cancelled out by the savings from not having aisles and aisles of open fridge-freezers, the huge lighting bills

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supermarkets rack up (have you noticed how bright Tesco is?) and us all driving in individual cars to out-of-town stores. He also reckons it would revolutionise packaging. Since we'd essentially be picking brands on the strength of their JPEGs, who'd care about the physical packaging? It could be minimal, plain and easily recycled.

For now, I'm aiming to limit myself to one supermarket hit a week. But I'd like to know about your supermarket habits -- do you shop at them? Could you survive without buying food from supermarkets? And what are your top tips for the alternatives -- markets, indy shops and home-grown grub?

Posted: 09 November 2007, 09:30am by [Adam Vaughan](#)

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#### Comments



**itstheruss** 09 November 2007 10:41am

I also still shop at Sainsbury's too but living outside of London, near Lakeside, there aren't that many alternatives.

It's a shame Sainsbury's organic range has been reduced. Their SO range is pretty good.

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**Verbina** 09 November 2007 12:03pm

I sound just like you, Able and Cole, Borough Market, but still rely on Waitrose (Ocado). We do try to buy consciously from there though, only British meat, and try to be as sensible as we can with non food stuff. We just can't quite see an alternative yet that fits in with our stupid working hours.

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**Ged** 09 November 2007 02:08pm

In certain London post codes Riverford now use pedivans - yes they can cycle your organic vegbox delivery. Now that is truly green.

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**Lozabeth** 09 November 2007 02:39pm

Farm shops in the countryside are getting smarter about doing deliveries and being open for longer hours - where I live, I can buy produce that's been grown (or reared) locally, but the only way I can access it is to drive to the farm shop...I still use the supermarket for non-food items though, as other shops just don't have the range of goods yet.

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**Martin** 09 November 2007 03:39pm

We try to avoid shopping in supermarkets, apart from some special dairy products I can get everything I need in ca 2-3 small, local shops, plus through my organic veg box scheme. Only if I need things like quark, soured cream, or fresh cream I can't avoid a supermarket. We live in Liverpool. Great shops here are Mattas on Bold Street and the Windmill on Smithdown Road. I also have an excellent local shop, Dani's 'International Foods' who stocks organic eggs on Granby Street.

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**Anonymous User** 30 January 2008 01:51pm

I can see how shopping online and getting veg boxes ordered from the countryside is an improvement but I fail to see why shopping at independent stores is so much better than shopping at supermarkets. As you say, there's generally very little info or choice on sourcing etc and I can't believe the electricity costs of supermarkets are so much worse than the a theoretical collection of independent stores supplying the same number of customers (in fact I'd imagine them to be worse, because of savings in economies of scale).

I always shop at Waitrose or the Co-operative because I want to support co-operatively-owned businesses and because they nearly always come out better than other companies when it comes to ethics (still a long way to go of course, but then they do need to compete profitably with other chains in order to survive).

- Nick

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**Anonymous User** 24 February 2008 10:22pm

People are lazy by nature and, yes, I do include myself in that statement. Here's my dilemma:

I live on a new development in a semi-rural location. There is only one way into my estate which is shared by an ASDA. The nearest farm shop is only 2 miles away but the food - as great as it is - costs more than twice as much as any supermarket. The nearest farmer's market is held every week in Cardiff but that's a 30 mile round-trip and, in order to get there, I must pass one ASDA, two Tesco's, two Sainsbury's and a Lidl.

I quit the corporate life and great salary a few years ago to become a freelance writer which let's be honest here, is not the most financially lucrative of careers. Which means that a 30-mile round-trip to my nearest farmer's market in a clapped-out Saab that drinks petrol for fun every week adds to my CO2

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emissions, adds to my fuel costs and adds to my food bill.

And, there are no box schemes operating in my area so my options are rather limited.

So, as much as I hate, I am forced to spend my money in the supermarkets - my local ASDA, which I can walk to, is perhaps the worst example of a supermarket. They 'hide' the organic section making it almost impossible to find (some of their staff don't even know where it is situated).

What's the solution? Effective box schemes covering all locations? Collective co-operatives whereby one person takes responsibility for purchasing the food for several families - buying in bulk from local suppliers thereby making it more affordable? Or should we all buy ourselves an allotment (as little as £30 per annum), don a pair of wellies and become the Tom and Barbara's of the new millennium? Answers on a postcard.

Paul MacKenzie-Cummins

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