Reading: Read the article and answer the questions below

Globalization and Food

We often hear about the world's "changing diet," and we think of this as a modern concept, but in a sense, the human diet has always been changing. The banana, for example, whose origins appear to be in the region that today is Malaysia, traveled to India, where Alexander the Great first tasted it; his soldiers brought it back to Greece in about 350 B.C. The potato had been grown in South America for thousands of years before the Spanish brought it back to Europe in 1570. As people traveled and traded more, they took both the banana and the potato to all corners of the world. It is true, however, that globalization is changing our diet faster than ever before.

Our Diet Today

In several ways, our modern diet differs from that of our great-great grandparents. Today, we have access to more kinds of foods from other countries. (The favorite food of many people worldwide? Pizza.) These days, we also have more fast foods and more take-out foods than in the past. More people are moving to urban areas, where they spend a lot of time both working and commuting to work, so there is less time to cook. Buying fast food and take-out food saves consumers time, and it also saves the cost of cooking fuel. Another change in the modern diet is a shift from traditional staples (basic, important foods) to more processed foods, which have chemicals or colorings added to preserve them, improve the taste, or make them look attractive. In many countries, foods that were basic in the past, such as tubers and root vegetables, are often replaced by rice – and rice, in turn, is replaced by wheat products, like readymade bread, which doesn't have as many nutrients as the traditional tubers.

Loss of Variety

Visit an international food court in almost any country, and it might seem that we have a greater variety of foods than in the past. You'll find foods from Mexico, Thailand, Japan, Italy, India, Korea, China, the United States, and so on. Our great-great grandparents did not have access to so many cuisines. Surprisingly, though, there are far fewer varieties of many foods than in the past. Imagine – our great-great grandparents may have tasted types of rice, corn, potatoes, or bananas that we will never experience.

For example, according to primalseeds.org, there were 8,000 traditional varieties of rice in China in 1949. By 1970, there were only 50. In the Philippines, too, thousands of kinds of rice have been lost. Mexico has lost approximately 80% of its varieties of maize (or corn). There are also thousands of other food crops – fruits, vegetables, nuts, and honey – and varieties of livestock (such as sheep and chickens) that are on the path to extinction. Unlike our ancestors, we might never have the opportunity to taste Melipona bee honey from Argentina, a Masakari pumpkin from Japan, a Ribera vanilla orange from Italy, or Dominique chicken from the United States. As Jeff Bentley, of the BBC, puts it, "Our generation" is killing ancient crops "which fed the Incas, the Mayans, the Sumerians, and the Tang dynasty."

Causes of Disappearing Varieties

Why are varieties of so many foods disappearing worldwide? The key reason is that farmers are replacing traditional varieties with modern ones – partly because these modern varieties are popular and partly because they are easy to ship to distant countries. Big industrial agriculture contributes to the problem: huge international companies are buying small family farms and shifting to newer – and fewer – crops but in great quantities. According to the

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Rainforest Conservation Fund, in the past, agriculture in different regions of the world was "independent and local. Now, however, much of it has become part of the global exchange economy." The seed industry contributes to the problem, too. Much of the seed that farmers plant is now produced by only three huge companies, and they sell only a few varieties. The difficulty of finding a variety of seeds is an obstacle to farmers who want to plant traditional crops.

The Story of Two Crops

Why should we be concerned? Two crops – the potato and the banana – illustrate the problem. In the 19th century, potatoes were the main source of food for most people in Europe – especially poor people. However, only a few of the thousands of varieties of potato in the Americas had been introduced in Europe. In 1845, a terrible plant disease swept through western Ireland which seven years, approximately one million people died and over one million more emigrated from Ireland because they were starving. Today, industrial agriculture might be causing a similar problem with the banana. There are about 300 varieties of banana, but in much of the world, people have access to exactly one – the Cavendish. If disease hits the Cavendish crop, people in many countries will no longer have bananas on their breakfast table.

Localization – The Solution

It's not too late, however, to save some of these endangered crops. The "Buy Local" movement is encouraging people to support farmers near their home. These are farmers who often grow less common varieties of food. An additional benefit for consumers at farmers' markets is that the food is fresh and full of nutrients because it hasn't been shipped around the world. Also, a priority of several organizations, such as the "Slow Food Foundation", is to collect seeds of endangered varieties and encourage local farmers to plant them. If they are successful, one day we might be able to taste "forgotten flavors" such as Shalakh apricot or Saskatoon berry.

Answer these questions:

1. Which are some of the ways that the human diet is changing?

2. Are the changes positive or negative for different countries?

3. Are the changes beneficial or harmful to people's health?

4. How will environmental changes affect food production in the future?

5. What solutions are there to the problems we face related to food?

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