



**THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®** *of the Fairfax Area*

**Wanda Wastewatcher Revisited**

## **Food for Thought, Part II**

**by Judy Prochko, E.Q. Committee**

Several years ago, my daughter was travelling in Italy and had the opportunity to stay with an Italian family in Perugia. One of the young men in the family, Kiko, had spent several years in the U. S. and could hardly wait for Kristen to taste real mozzarella. "And what is real mozzarella?," Kristen asked. He replied, "Real mozzarella is not prepackaged in plastic with an expiration date stamped on it!" This little vignette illustrates the vast differences in food processing and delivery that often exist between the U.S. and other countries.

It is true that we have one of the most sanitary food supplies in the world, but food and beverage processing, packaging, distribution, and storage come at an environmental cost. For example, frozen foods generally require ten times more energy to produce than if eaten fresh. In 1960, 92 percent of the potatoes consumed by Americans were fresh. But by 1989, we ate almost as many frozen potatoes as fresh ones--no doubt attributable in part to McDonald's great french fries! This trend toward frozen over fresh is catching on overseas as well. The Japanese have become fond of frozen pizza, and frozen dinners are becoming increasingly popular in Western Europe.

The packaging required to feed the consumer society is enormous. In nations where the water is safest, it is ironic that people choose to drink beer, bottled water, soda and other commercially-prepared concoctions out of single-use containers. Did you know that one fourth of the aluminum used in the U. S. goes into the production of beverage cans?

Some countries are reversing the trend toward throwaway beverage containers by legislative action. Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway aggressively promote the reuse and recycling of food and beverage containers. In New Zealand, where throwaway plastic milk jugs are a relatively new phenomenon, there is a major campaign to reject plastic and return to refillables.

The successful Perrier campaign during the affluent 1980's made it fashionable to drink bottled water that had to be transported across an entire ocean to reach its market. Within our own country, food often travels great distances to get to your local supermarket--and, at great ecological cost. It takes three times as much energy to transport a head of lettuce from California to Virginia as it does to grow it...and, the supply lines seem to be getting longer. The next time you purchase fish, ask the clerk where it comes from. I am commonly told "China" or "New Zealand"...astonishing. Wherever money can be made, it seems there are entrepreneurs ready to fill the desires of consumers. Third world countries are clearing

land to raise cattle to sell to affluent countries. Ecologically valuable mangrove forests are being lost as countries develop shrimp and shellfish farming industries.

The world cannot continue to afford to feed a growing population with the diet to which we have become accustomed. What to do? The farmers markets that have sprung up all over the country are a healthy trend. They are reconnecting city folk with the folks who grow the food. Not only does this shorten the distance from field to table, but less food is wasted because shoppers are more willing to buy irregularly sized produce from a farmer than they would at the supermarket. The produce is often superior which makes it more enjoyable to eat with less chance of waste. How often have you purchased fruit at the supermarket which looks great but is tasteless when you sink your teeth into it? If you prefer one-stop shopping at your supermarket, you may want to talk to the produce man about your preference for locally grown produce.

Another ecologically sound tip is to buy produce that is in season locally whenever possible. Those strawberries you see in the market in February are not only expensive, they are probably imported from Southern Mexico and will disappoint your taste buds.

Globally, our ultimate goal should be not to export our diet of meat and heavily processed and packaged food, but to market our advanced technologies. These technologies might include small, efficient refrigerators, advanced cooking stoves, hot water for washing, and the wherewithal to provide a safe water supply. These technologies would greatly improve world health. In turn, we would do well to adopt a basic menu of more locally grown fruits and vegetables, less factory-prepared foods and less meat, poultry and seafood. We could drink water from the tap instead of from far-off countries. Incidentally, this may be better for your health because bottled water is not as tightly regulated as tap water and frequently contains contaminants such as solvents and heavy metals.

In closing, we have come to equate disposable, heavily packaged food with a higher quality of life when, in truth, it pollutes the environment and robs future generations of nonrenewable resources.

**ECOFACT:** Both Denmark and Germany require restaurants to separate food waste from trash so that it can be used as animal food.

**ECOWISDOM:** *We seem to believe we can get everything we need from the supermarket and corner drugstore. We don't understand that everything has a source in the land or sea, and that we must respect those sources.* Thor Heyerdahl