

Reportage:

# Shopping for revolution

Reporter:

**Paul Mitchell**

It's a mundane household task: peel the shopping list off the fridge and take it to the shops. But if, like me, you were to take your list to the supermarket with Nick Ray, you would find yourself in the middle of a domestic revolution.

Nick is the founder of Ethical Consumer Group, based in the multi-ethnic Melbourne suburb of Footscray. While other groups address sustainability issues, Ethical Consumer Group is the only Australian organisation that focuses specifically on our everyday purchasing habits. And what they cost the planet.

'One of the ways we help people think about what they buy is via our ethical shopping tours,' Nick told me. 'It's a way we can engage consumers with issues to do with sustainable and ethical purchasing. The idea is we set groups of people the task, using our *Guide*, of getting the best buy for the planet on a certain item. And after the tour we talk about the issues over a meal we cook with what we've bought.'

We entered Coles Footscray, which is like Coles everywhere, except for a high proportion of Asian and African Australians. I immediately thought about cheap and slave labour on those continents and looked at the ten items I needed, wondering how much my regular purchasing pattern contributed to inequality. Bananas were the first item pencilled on my list so Nick and I trooped to the fruit and vegie section and I showed him the standard fruit I'd usually purchase.

'From Queensland, so not great on food miles, but as a "best buy" they are, of course, better than imported. Bananas are a big issue in Europe, with most imported from South American or Asian countries,' Nick said, explaining that workers are exploited and exposed to toxic chemicals. 'In Australia, we grow our own, mostly in Queensland, and so we avoid many of those issues.'

Okay, so I'd made a reasonable start. Tomatoes weren't on my list, but, to show off, I pointed to the ones I'd normally buy: vine-ripened hydroponic – minus the nasty plastic wrapping that covers the identical Coles home brand. If my tour were a board game, that tomato choice would have lost me the space I'd advanced with my banana purchase.

'Growing hydroponic tomatoes produces a lot of greenhouse gases because of the amount of energy needed to run the hothouses,' Nick said, showing me the Australian-grown Romas, the likely best tomato purchase. But there were problems there, too.

'There's no information about where they're grown. It says "product of Australia", which is good, but we don't know how far they've travelled. Or who owns the company.' Nick craned his head up and down the Roma crate, looking for a little sticker that denoted exactly where the tomatoes were grown, who grew them and who owned them. The crate didn't have one, but plenty of other fruit and veggie boxes did.

'I don't think the supermarkets leave them there to offer information though,' Nick smiled.

It seemed the stickers were a happy accident that could help the ethical shopper. I asked about the status of some of the other fruit and vegetables and noticed that, ironically, Tracy Chapman's song 'Talkin' Bout a Revolution' was playing through the Coles speakers. When it came to ethical shopping, I wondered if we were at a moment similar to the beginning of domestic recycling in the 1970s.

**I** hope so,' Nick said. 'Common business practice is one that reduces cost by any means, but we've just seen Woolworths is going to have a separate aisle for free range eggs; they're going to label them really clearly, because there has been demand.'

Nick said Ethical Food Group tried to fast track information to people and help them draw the connections between their purchases and what they really care about.

'I believe people really do care, they live lives of care, but they don't translate in the bigger picture. But even though we're fast tracking information, actual change takes a lot of time.'

That's for sure – it took me ten years to finally get a bread-making machine for my kitchen. But due to the arrival of a new baby – and the subsequent time shortage – sliced bread was on my shopping list. I was eager to make up for my 'attack of the killer tomatoes' so I told Nick I'd normally buy Edwards bread.

'Great choice,' he enthused, 'locally made; it's what I buy.'

I was back on form. Trouble was, as I hunted the shelves, I couldn't find Edwards anywhere and I had to go to my second choices. And that really set the yeast amongst the dough: which was my next best buy, Lawson's Traditional or Alpine? Lawson's was made in NSW, therefore more food miles, but it was Australian-owned. Its packaging – brown paper – was recyclable, except for the clear plastic window.

Alpine Bread, on the other loaf, used full plastic wrap, a recycling faux pas, but it was baked closer to Footscray: Benalla, Victoria. It wasn't clear, however, whether or not Alpine was Australian-owned. I stood like a street art statue, loaves of bread in my hand, exhibiting the ethical shopping paralysis Nick wanted me to avoid.

'It is a minefield, there are lots of issues, and we have limited time and resources to make decisions. But what we do with our tours and workshops is try to present some principles and a context for trying to work our way through that minefield. So we don't have people saying, which they do, "I value all those things, they're fantastic, and I'll start this process tomorrow".'

To shop ethically we have to contend with multiple issues and Nick reeled off another kind of shopping list: genetic modification, Fairtrade, packaging/recycling, Australian-owned, nutrition, animal issues, food miles, chemicals, company record...

'I tell people, "Don't try to take them all on, it will blow your mind",' he laughed, adding that he encouraged people to start with the issue they were most passionate about. 'For one person it might be making sure the chocolate in their cocoa is not sourced from kids working in slave conditions in West Africa, for another it might be animals, looking for a free range alternative rather than factory farmed meat.'

When it came to me and my bread, Nick said I needed to make a call on what was the 'best buy' and move on.

'Some products meet a whole lot of criteria, but with most products it's a trade-off. For example, you might be looking for local and organic, but you might only get one or the other for a certain product. The best buy is about prioritising our values.'

He said it was also easy to ignore some basic principles when we clacked our trolleys up and down the aisles: our shopping *does* make a difference – he bemoaned that our common practices contributed to our environmental crisis – and, as obesity levels show, we don't need half the stuff we put in the trolley.

'Every supermarket purchase should be about enacting a value, rather than just fulfilling a need.'

Ethical Food Group's slogan is 'your dollar is your vote' and he said we needed to think about who we were electing when we filled our fridges. He cited Cadbury's recent cost-cutting move of putting in its chocolate palm oil instead of cocoa – at the expense of orang-utans in Borneo.

'Cadbury were working from that basic business model of cutting costs, but at the other end we had people saying, "Hey, no, we're not going to buy your product",' he said, adding that Cadbury had admitted they were wrong and had promised to move to Fairtrade cocoa sources by Easter 2010. 'So that's a dynamic of supply and demand in action that we rarely see.'

My list demanded yoghurt and I showed Nick my choice: a tub of Gippsland Dairy. It was a winner: low on food miles, great on recycling, all locally grown and owned. While I was at the dairy section, I pointed to my normal milk choice: Coles home brand.

‘With home brand, the supermarkets don’t have to show who their suppliers are, so it’s impossible to know if your home brand milk is sourced from the same farmers as the branded milk. And the growers get far less of the profits from the sale of home brand products.’

Nick said the key issue here was transparency. ‘That’s what’s underneath a whole lot of issues. It would help us at the consumer end and that has been lost with a globalised economy; there are a whole lot of middlemen in the process who aren’t accountable up the chain.’

Recent reports about shonky egg labelling (according to NSW Green MP John Kaye, almost 37 million free range eggs in the past three years were likely cage or barn laid) added to an atmosphere of distrust.

‘Credible systems are the key,’ Nick said, referring to Fairtrade and Certified Organic. ‘We’re never going to have one umbrella “green” labelling system because there are multiple issues, but it’s making sure those we have do have substance.’

The Ethical Consumer Group’s *Guide to Ethical Supermarket Shopping* is an attempt to create some of that transparency. Using criteria such as ownership, production values, human and animal welfare, company record and recycling, it ranks for consumers food and other grocery producers in order of ethical preference. As well as pointing out who offers the best buys on particular items, the *Guide* also calls for boycotts on a range of manufacturers, including Nestlé, the world’s largest food producer, for marketing infant formula in developing countries.

‘Nestlé produces 20 per cent of the world’s food – so making change there is really important,’ Nick said, adding that many larger food producers have made forays into Fairtrade, organic and other sustainable and ethical actions. ‘I hate to say it, but I’m cynical about whether those changes are any more than token.’

I know I want to be the change I’d like to see at the checkout, but I’m worried it’s going to cost me a fortune. In the dairy aisle, for example, I saw that the branded milk was over a dollar more expensive than the home brand and thought, well...

‘Sometimes it’s going to cost you more, sometimes it isn’t,’ Nick said. ‘Buying seasonally, you often come away having spent less, and your food tasting better. There are certain margins in regard to Fairtrade, Certified Organic and other systems that add a cost for that transparency. But, with organics for example, it is investing in a new system of doing agriculture that is largely beyond the fossil fuel economy.’

We finally left the dairy aisle and continued our tour. I was in for some more shocks: the two-dollar box of dry biscuits I give the kids for an after school snack were Made in China, Uncle Toby's was owned by Nestlé and therefore black-banned, and UK-owned Kellogg's, makers of my son's beloved Nutri-Grain, got an 'avoid where possible' cross in Nick's guide. I started rating companies and products as 'good' or 'bad', but Nick pulled me up.

'Ethical is a broad brushstroke; it's not good or bad, it's values. And it really depends what you're emphasising.'

When it came time to roll my items on the black conveyor, my total came to \$35.34 for cream, yoghurt, bananas, snack biscuits and a few other items. I really couldn't tell you if that was more or less than I'd usually spend. But I knew one thing: I'd made the best purchases I possibly could have for the environment and the planet. And I was inspired to do it again.

'If it has been a good tour, people come away empowered,' Nick told me. 'It's challenging territory; we need to lay out the nature of some pretty hard realities, that there are big systems – way bigger than us – that we have minimal control over. But that is balanced with the fact that we are in control of our own actions at the consumer end, and we can have a voice and an impact with our purchases.'

Like, for example, when we buy weird-named confectionary.

'On one tour, we set the kids the task of buying dessert and they came back with Wizz Fizz. And it turns out it is a product of Australia, a locally owned company, manufacturing locally.'

Now that's sweet news for the planet. ■