

Supermarkets

Supermarkets are often castigated for their impact on the environment and yet most of us use them. **Simon Birch** assesses which ones have the most wildlife-friendly policies.

How does shopping at a supermarket affect the environment?

Supermarkets are the biggest and most powerful businesses in the country, and their environmental impact extends to virtually every corner of the world. In the UK, campaigners accuse supermarkets of playing a major role in the loss of wildlife from our countryside.

"Supermarkets continually look to increase their profit margins, which means that farmers face never-ending downward pressure on their prices, leading to ever more pressure to intensify production," says Helen Rimmer, supermarket campaigner with Friends of the Earth. "This is having a massive negative impact on biodiversity as the scope for more environmentally sustainable farming practices is reduced."

From overseas, supermarkets source products such as palm oil, whose production in South-east Asia is having a devastating impact on tropical rainforests that are home to orangutans and Sumatran tigers. And then there's climate change...

What is the link with climate change?

Research suggests that 30 per cent of the UK's carbon emissions are associated with the production and distribution of our food, so

supermarkets – where more than 80 per cent of us buy our food – clearly have a massive impact.

One of the problems is that supermarkets have industrialised food production to such an extent that the use of fossil fuels is irreversibly built into the system. This includes the fertilisers, pesticides and tractors required to grow the food, the vast fleets of lorries needed to transport it around the UK and the planes used to air-freight food in from overseas.

Supermarkets have so industrialised food production that the use of fossil fuels is built into the system.

At the other end of the chain, shoppers have now become car-dependent as they need to drive to the out-of-town stores that themselves have enormous carbon footprints.

The issue of the air-freighted Kenyan bean has come to symbolise the vast distance that our food now travels to reach our dinner plates, and the environmental damage that this causes. But while some people argue for the economic benefits that this brings to struggling African

farmers, the long-term sustainable solution lies in boosting Africa's own domestic markets and ditching long-haul vegetables in favour of low-carbon, locally grown alternatives.

Are the supermarkets doing anything to reduce their environmental impact?

Stung by years of criticism, supermarkets are finally swinging into action. All of those included in our survey, except Morrisons, have embarked on high-profile, big-budget environmental programmes in recent years. "There's genuine competition between the supermarkets to try and attract the ethically aware shopper, and this is driving standards up," says Rob Harrison, editor of *Ethical Consumer Magazine*.

The line used by supermarkets – that they must offer consumer choice when still selling products such as unsustainable fish – is no longer defensible," says Rob Harrison. "And we are increasingly seeing supermarkets changing the lines that they sell." Harrison cites how the Co-op has switched all of its own-brand coffee, chocolate and tea to Fairtrade as just one example of what's called 'choice-editing'

– where, in effect, the supermarket reduces the choice to consumers to raise its environmental performance.

So can supermarkets ever be truly green?

No, according to Rimmer and the army of other campaigners who target them on a range of issues from their impact on local economies to pesticide use and child labour.

"The supermarket model isn't sustainable because it's so energy dependent and requires ever-increasing profits," she says. "We need localised food production and more local shops."

Rimmer welcomes moves by supermarkets to improve their energy efficiency, but she wants to see Government action. "Voluntary initiatives by supermarkets are no substitute for Government-imposed environmental standards. What's needed is an independent supermarket watchdog as recommended by the Competition Commission two years ago."

Ultimately, our reliance on low-cost food is to blame, she says. "Supermarkets lead shoppers to believe that food should be cheap, but it's the environment that's left picking up the bill."



Being green when we shop isn't simply about choosing organic produce: it's about using the store with the best environmental policies.

HOW WE ASSESSED THE SUPERMARKETS

THE EXPERT
Freelance journalist
Simon Birch

has been covering environmental and ethical issues for more than 15 years. He writes for *BBC Wildlife*, the *Guardian* and *Ethical Consumer Magazine*.

THE TEST

Not all supermarkets are the same when it comes to environmental policies, so to help you decide where to shop, we've put the six biggest companies (based on the number of stores they own) to a unique test. We looked at eight aspects of

their businesses relating to the environment and wildlife:

Air miles

» How much local food does the supermarket buy and does it label food that's air-freighted?

Animal welfare

» What is the supermarket's policy on battery eggs and chickens?

Climate change

» Does the supermarket have specific targets for tackling climate change?

Fair trade

» To what extent does it support Fairtrade products?

Fish

» How much does it support the Marine Stewardship Council

(MSC) scheme that certifies sustainable fisheries?

GM food

» Campaigners are concerned that genetically modified (GM) technology is coming in by the back door. Are cattle used in the supermarket's products fed GM feed?

Organics & pesticides

» How much does the supermarket support organics and has it eliminated a number of hazardous pesticides?

Palm oil

» What is the policy on palm oil, whose production is leading to massive rainforest loss and the decline of species, such as orangutans, in South-east Asia?

SUPERMARKET ALTERNATIVES

If you are concerned about the power and influence of supermarkets, there are a few alternatives:

» Shop locally – between 1997 and 2002, 13,000 specialist shops closed down in the UK, so use **independent stores** if you can.

» Get an **organic box of fruit and veg** delivered. To find your nearest supplier, visit the Soil Association website www.soilassociation.org (click 'Take action', then 'Buy organic', 'Buy from farmers' and finally 'Read our guide to local box schemes') or ☎ 0117 314 5000.

» Take care, though: there are a number of **national veg box businesses** (ie, Riverford, Abel & Cole), but since they operate using a centralised distribution hub, the carbon footprint of delivering food can be high.

» Find your nearest **farmers' market** from FARMA ☎ 0845 458 8420 or visit www.farmersmarkets.net

» Club together with friends, neighbours or work colleagues and form a **food-buying co-op**. These work by people buying directly from a wholesaler, thereby benefiting from cheaper wholesale prices. Suma is a wholesaler that welcomes food-buying co-ops (minimum spend: £250) ☎ 01422 313861; www.sumawholesale.coop

» More information about food-buying co-ops is available from Sustain ☎ 0207 837 1228; www.sustainweb.org/foodcoopstoolkit

» Grow your own food. The National Society of Allotments and Leisure Gardeners has information about **allotments** ☎ 01536 266576 or visit www.nsalg.org.uk

» **Keep chickens**. The Battery Hen Welfare Trust provides battery-caged hens that would otherwise be slaughtered. Feed them well and you'll get fresh eggs for up to three years. The trust expects a donation of about £3 and you'll also have the cost of a hen house ☎ 01769 580310; www.bhwt.org.uk



Give ex-battery hens a second chance at life and they will give you fresh eggs.

| <p>Below are the questions that we asked each supermarket. To avoid meaningless responses, we asked questions that required concrete answers. These included, "Do you have measurable targets for a particular issue?" and "How many of a particular item do you sell?"</p> |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|---|--|--|--|---|
|  <p>AIR MILES What proportion of your in-season vegetables are sourced from within the UK? Do you promote locally grown food within the store? Do you label air-freighted food?</p> | <p>ASDA sources 90 per cent of its in-season vegetables from the UK (40 per cent increase in past year). Aims to provide 10,000 local lines by 2010. Air-freighted food not labelled. 3/5</p> | <p>100 per cent of in-season vegetables are sourced from the UK. Works with growers to extend the season of a number of UK lines. All air-freighted food is labelled. 4/5</p> | <p>100 per cent of in-season vegetables are sourced from within the UK. Regional food is highlighted by a separate unit within the store. All air-freighted food is labelled. 4/5</p> | <p>Sainsbury's aims to source UK products where possible. All eggs sold are produced within 120km of larger stores. Air-freighted food isn't labelled. 2/5</p> | <p>Has a target of sourcing 100 per cent of in-season vegetables from the UK (though these may be supplemented from overseas where necessary). Doesn't label air-freighted food. 4/5</p> | <p>100 per cent of in-season vegetables are sourced from within the UK. Claims to be the only retailer to sell UK carrots all year round. All air-freighted food is labelled. 4/5</p> |
|  <p>ANIMAL WELFARE Do you sell battery-chicken eggs? Will you sell eggs from 'enriched cages' (slightly larger cages set to replace battery-cages in 2012)? What proportion of your standard chickens are RSPCA 'Freedom Food' labelled?</p> | <p>Battery-caged eggs are still sold and ASDA plans to sell eggs laid by hens in enriched cages. Freedom Food-labelled chicken accounts for 8 per cent of all ASDA chickens sold. 1/5</p> | <p>Battery-caged eggs still sold because Tesco claims customers want cheap food. It will be selling eggs produced by hens in enriched cages. 1/5</p> | <p>Battery-caged eggs sold, but aims to convert own-brand eggs to free-range by 2010. Eggs from enriched cages will not be sold. 15 per cent of chickens are either Freedom Food or organic. 3/5</p> | <p>Battery-caged eggs were banned in February 2009, but own-brand eggs are laid by hens in enriched cages. 16 per cent of chickens sold are Freedom Food-labelled. 3/5</p> | <p>Banned battery-caged eggs in 2006 and own-brand eggs are Freedom Food-labelled or organic. Freedom Food-labelled chicken accounts for 5 per cent of sales. 4/5</p> | <p>Only sells free-range eggs and will not be selling eggs from hens in enriched cages. All chicken meets virtually all Freedom Food welfare standards. 4/5</p> |
|  <p>CLIMATE CHANGE Do you have specific targets for reducing your carbon emissions? How do you intend to reach these targets? Please give examples – ie through generation of renewable energy or energy-efficiency measures.</p> | <p>Aims to cut emissions in new buildings by 10 per cent by the end of 2009 and to be supplied by 100 per cent renewable energy, though no target date has been set. 3/5</p> | <p>Tesco aims to halve emissions from existing buildings and new stores by 2020 against a 2006 baseline. Pioneering carbon-labelling of products. 4/5</p> | <p>In 2008, it reached its target of reducing carbon emissions by 36 per cent against 2005 emissions ahead of a 2010 deadline. Achieved Carbon Trust standard for carbon reduction work. 4/5</p> | <p>Target of reducing emissions by 25 per cent by 2012 against a 2005 baseline. A new flagship green store in Dartmouth has achieved carbon reduction of 40 per cent. 3/5</p> | <p>Detailed targets include reducing emissions from distribution fleet by 15 per cent by 2013 based on 2005 levels. Aims to generate 15 per cent of energy from renewable sources by 2012. 4/5</p> | <p>Aims to become carbon neutral by 2012 through energy-efficiency measures and use of renewable electricity. Has four 'eco-factories' that use 50 per cent less energy. 4/5</p> |
|  <p>FAIR TRADE Have you converted your own-brand chocolate, coffee or tea to being 100 per cent Fairtrade? How many Fairtrade lines do you sell?</p> | <p>ASDA has not converted any of its own-brand chocolate, coffee or tea to Fairtrade. It sells 100 Fairtrade lines. 1/5</p> | <p>Sells some own-brand Fairtrade chocolate, coffee and tea. Currently sells 188 Fairtrade lines and claims to be world's second largest retailer of Fairtrade cotton clothing. 3/5</p> | <p>Morrison's has not converted its own-brand chocolate, coffee or tea to Fairtrade and carries just 10 Fairtrade lines, including coffee, tea and fruit. 1/5</p> | <p>Own-brand tea is Fairtrade, coffee will become 100 per cent Fairtrade by the end of 2009 and some own-brand chocolate is Fairtrade. Sainsbury's carries 700 Fairtrade lines. 4/5</p> | <p>First supermarket to convert all own-brand chocolate, coffee and tea to Fairtrade. Pioneered UK sales of Fairtrade bananas, grapes and wine. Has more than 260 Fairtrade lines. 4/5</p> | <p>All own-brand coffee and tea is Fairtrade. All sugar used in own-brand jams and preserves is Fairtrade. Carries 100 Fairtrade lines. 3/5</p> |
|  <p>FISH Do you sell threatened bluefin tuna, skate, Atlantic haddock, tiger prawns or wild Atlantic salmon? How many Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) lines do you sell? Are your own-brand fish fingers MSC-labelled?</p> | <p>Doesn't sell any of the threatened fish apart from tiger prawns. Aims to sell only MSC-labelled fish by 2011 but has issues with supply. Own-brand fish fingers use MSC-labelled pollock. 3/5</p> | <p>Doesn't sell any of the targeted fish apart from tiger prawns. Didn't provide details of the number of MSC-labelled fish lines. Own-brand fish fingers are not MSC-labelled. 1/5</p> | <p>Doesn't sell any of the listed fish apart from tiger prawns. Carries 8 fresh fish MSC-labelled lines, plus 2 lines of MSC-accredited tuna. Own-brand fish fingers are not MSC-labelled. 2/5</p> | <p>Doesn't sell any of the listed fish apart from tiger prawns. Carries 56 lines of MSC-labelled fish. Own-brand fish fingers are made with MSC-labelled pollock and sustainable palm oil. 4/5</p> | <p>The Co-op doesn't sell any of the threatened fish apart from tiger prawns. Sells 12 MSC-labelled fish lines, half of which are different types of tinned salmon. 3/5</p> | <p>Doesn't sell any of the listed fish apart from tiger prawns. Sells 8 MSC-labelled fish, 20 per cent of total. Fish used in M&S own-brand fish fingers is not MSC-labelled. 3/5</p> |
|  <p>GM FEED Are the cattle that produce your own-brand dairy and meat products fed on non-GM feed? Do you label your own-brand dairy and meat products as being produced without GM products?</p> | <p>Only cattle used to produce ASDA's organic own-brand range of meat and dairy are fed on GM-free feed. Cattle used to produce ASDA's standard own-brand products are not. 1/5</p> | <p>Only cattle used to produce Tesco's organic own-brand range of meat and dairy are fed on GM-free feed. Cattle used to produce Tesco's standard own-brand products are not GM-free. 1/5</p> | <p>Only cattle used to produce Morrison's organic own-brand range of meat and dairy are fed on GM-free feed. Cattle used to produce Morrison's standard products are not fed GM-free food. 1/5</p> | <p>Only cattle used to produce Sainsbury's organic own-brand range of meat and dairy are fed on GM-free feed. Cattle used to produce its standard products are not fed GM-free feed. 1/5</p> | <p>All cattle are reared outdoors on grass, supplemented with cattle cake containing minerals and vitamins that can't be guaranteed to have been produced without GM technology. 4/5</p> | <p>All M&S own-brand meat and dairy is produced without using GM feed (though none of these products are labelled as being GM-free). 3/5</p> |
|  <p>ORGANICS & PESTICIDES Have you eliminated hazardous pesticides from your operations (as recommended by the Pesticides Trust)? What percentage of your fresh produce has an organic alternative? How many organic lines do you sell?</p> | <p>Did not answer questions on pesticides and opposed reduction in number of pesticides allowed for use in EU. Sells organic alternatives for all vegetables, but didn't say how many lines. 1/5</p> | <p>Use of carbendazim, endosulphan and methyl bromide virtually eliminated. Paraquat use has halved in the past two years. Unable to provide figure for total number of organic products. 3/5</p> | <p>Morrison's chose not to answer questions relating to pesticide use. 6.5 per cent of fresh fruit and veg are organic (39 out of total product range of 601). 1/5</p> | <p>Some pesticides allowed only with Sainsbury's permission; others allowed but residues monitored. Up to 80 organic fruit and veg lines available, out of more than 400 in total. 3/5</p> | <p>Methyl bromide is banned, and others are only allowed with permission. Use of Paraquat allowed but monitored. 5 per cent (22 lines out of 432) of fresh fruit and veg are organic. 3/5</p> | <p>Maneb banned by M&S across all operations and use of many others is severely restricted. 71 per cent of fruit and veg have an organic alternative; carries 549 organic lines in total. 4/5</p> |
|  <p>PALM OIL Do you sell any own-brand products made using sustainable palm oil? Do you aim to reduce the amount of non-sustainable palm oil used in your own brands?</p> | <p>Use of palm oil from Indonesian Borneo and Sumatra is banned in own-brand products. Supports use of Greenpalm, sustainable palm oil, which is used in its cafés. 3/5</p> | <p>Tesco currently sells no products using sustainable palm oil, but has a commitment to using only sustainable palm oil in its own-brand products by 2015. 1/5</p> | <p>Products made from sustainable palm oil are now on sale, but Morrison's would not specify which. Encourages suppliers to source sustainable palm oil, but hasn't set target dates. 2/5</p> | <p>All own-brand fish fingers, frozen fish and most soaps are made using sustainable palm oil. Aims to switch to using sustainable palm oil in all of its own-brand products by 2014. 4/5</p> | <p>No own-brand products contain sustainable palm oil, but all carry label highlighting this. The Co-op is looking to switch to sustainable palm oil, but no deadline has been set. 2/5</p> | <p>Sells 7 products using palm oil that should get sustainable certification later this year. Committed to using only sustainable palm oil in products by 2015. 4/5</p> |
|  <p>OUR VERDICT Indicates the winner in each test category</p> | <p>Good commitment and action on climate change and palm oil. Plus improved fish policy following a high-profile Greenpeace campaign. But ASDA needs to improve its record on animal welfare, GM food and especially organics and pesticides. 16/40</p> | <p>Tesco may be the UK's number one supermarket, but it is second to last in our survey. Its work on climate change is interesting, but apart from that there's little evidence that it's really engaging with other environmental issues. 18/40</p> | <p>Morrison's demonstrates a strong commitment to taking action on climate change, but still has a lot of work to do in most other areas, especially organic and pesticides and particularly Fairtrade, where the supermarket scored worst. 18/40</p> | <p>Sainsbury's demonstrates strong commitment and action on palm oil and sustainable fish, and its policies on Fairtrade and organics have helped to make these issues more mainstream. It needs to improve its record on GM feed and pesticides. 24/40</p> | <p>The Co-op has worked hard to position itself as the UK's leading ethical supermarket, with pioneering work on climate change, Fairtrade and local food. Also strong on pesticides and GM feed, but let down by sustainable fish and organics policy. 28/40</p> | <p>M&S is well on track to reach its target of being the UK's most environmentally responsible supermarket. Its strong policies and action show that it is fully engaged with virtually all of the major issues. 29/40</p> |

