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The Real Price of Avocados

In recent years, avocados have become a popular symbol that represents clean eating, brunch culture, as well as health and wellness in the U.S.. It's famous for it's many uses, such being used for avocado toast, and being used discreetly in recipes for its health benefits since it is often celebrated as a "superfood." But behind this green trend lies a much darker reality that includes deforestation, stolen water, exploitative labor practices, and violence in the communities that grow them. The same fruit that is huge symbol for health on Instagram is often produced under conditions that are detrimental to people and the planet. The global demand for avocados has skyrocketed, with the U.S. leading the charge as its largest importer. Mexico supplies the majority of those avocados, with the state of Michoacán at the heart of the industry. As avocados have become a vital part of Mexico's economy, the pressure to meet international demand has transformed what was once a local crop into a powerful global commodity. The booming demand for avocados, especially from U.S. consumers, has exposed a hidden side of the global food system, where environmental damage, worker exploitation, and the displacement of local communities are often overlooked. By digging into the story behind how avocados are grown, sold, and consumed, this essay argues that achieving real food justice means more than just shopping ethically as a consumer. It requires changes at every level, from international trade rules to grassroots action on the ground

History

The history of avocados begin in Central Mexico and the broader Mesoamerican region. Archaeological evidence from Coaxcatlan, Puebla, indicates that avocados were cultivated as far back as 10,000 years ago! (*The Problem with Avocados.* Food Empowerment Project.) Playing an important cultural role among pre-Columbian societies like the Maya, who even included the avocado as a symbol in their calendar. Avocados trace their biological origins to Guatemala, Mexico, or the West Indies. Today, Mexico is the world's leading producer, with the state of Michoacán, responsible for 80% of Mexican production, alone growing half of all the avocados consumed globally. (*The Problem with Avocados.* Food Empowerment Project.) This is because the region's unique climate and geography support ideal conditions for the avocado tree, which thrives in tropical and Mediterranean environments. Avocados used to depend on a large, now-extinct megafauna for seed dispersal. Now in modern agriculture, however, commercial production is sustained through grafting and rooting cuttings. As global demand for avocados surged, cultivation expanded, coming at the expense of the environment . Natural forests have been cleared to make way for plantations, and irrigation practices have placed significant strain on local water resources, contributing to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity.

Mexico's approach to growing its economy has changed a lot over the years. It used to rely on government-led development and protecting its local industries. But after facing major debt problems, the country shifted to more free-market, globalized policies. It opened up to foreign investment and trade, becoming one of the first places to fully embrace globalization. One major turning point in Mexico's economic shift came with the signing of NAFTA in 1994, something we explored in class through *Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies, and the Destruction of Mexico*. The deal was supposed to open up trade between Mexico, the U.S., and Canada, but it didn't play out well for everyone. While it promised equal opportunity, small

farmers in Mexico were hit the hardest. At first, U.S. avocado growers were protected by rules that kept Mexican avocados out of the market. But once those protections were lifted, Mexican avocados flooded into the U.S., and suddenly, Mexico was focused on growing high-value export crops, such as avocados, while depending on imports for everyday staples like corn. This hurt local farmers who could no longer compete with the cheap corn coming in from the U.S., pushing 1.3 million of them out of work between 1994 and 2004. (*The Problem with Avocados.* Food Empowerment Project.) Many had to migrate, often to the U.S., looking for new ways to survive. This shows how trade deals like NAFTA can completely reshape farming, food systems, and even where people live and work. The United States within the last two decades has seen an explosion in avocado consumption, particularly in the United States. Consumption quadrupled between 2001 and 2021, reaching 8 pounds per person annually. (*The Problem with Avocados.* Food Empowerment Project.) Currently, 87% of avocados consumed in the U.S. come from Mexico, primarily from the Michoacán region. (*Avocado Mania: The Rise and Costs of Our Obsession with Avocados*)

Avocados didn't just become popular on their own. A lot of their rise comes from marketing, such as branding them as a "superfood" and tying them to big events like the Super Bowl for making guacamole, helped turn them into a kind of everyday luxury. But despite how common they are now, there's a lot consumers don't see when it comes to how avocados are grown and sold. The supply chain behind avocados is long and complicated, which makes it easy to ignore the harm along the way. But since global food systems aren't very transparent, most people never realize there is that side. With so many steps between the avocado coming from the tree and the grocery store, it's hard to know where our food really comes from, and even harder to shop in a way that's fully ethical or hold companies accountable.

Social+ Environmental Impacts

As global demand for avocados continues to rise, especially from the U.S., regions like Michoacán and Jalisco in Mexico are facing serious environmental consequences. Illegal deforestation is a major issue, with native forests being cleared to make room for avocado orchards. This has led to the loss of biodiversity, disrupted water systems, and even increased the risk of floods and landslides. In 2021, estimates showed up to 36,000 acres of forest were being lost each year in Michoacán alone.(*The Problem with Avocados.* Food Empowerment Project.) Species like the monarch butterfly are directly impacted as illegal farming spreads into protected areas. Avocados need a lot of water to grow as well. In many cases, that water is taken illegally, draining underground reserves and leaving nearby communities with little to no water. On top of that, these large-scale avocado farms often rely on heavy use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. This doesn't just hurt the environment, it also poisons local water and harms pollinators that the ecosystem depends on. In Michoacán, many Indigenous and local farmers have been pushed aside or forced out. Workers in the avocado industry often face long hours, low wages, and few rights or protections, some even working 12-hour days for just $130 a week. (*The Problem with Avocados.* Food Empowerment Project.) In the U.S., farmworkers also suffer from poor housing, exposure to chemicals, and abuse. Worse, the value of avocados has attracted organized crime. Cartels have taken over parts of the industry through violence and extortion, forcing farmers to pay "protection" fees or give up their land. Some workers have even been held at gunpoint, while activists and community defenders have faced deadly threats.(*Mexico: Avocados for Export Fueling Deforestation and Abuse: U.S. and Mexican Governments, Corporations Failing to Ensure Sustainable Supply Chains*) One community, the Purépecha people of Cherán, fought back by declaring self-rule and banning commercial avocado farms to

protect their land and people. (*The Problem with Avocados.* Food Empowerment Project.) Even though Mexico grows about half the world's avocados, many people there can't even afford to buy them. A single good avocado can cost as much as a day's wages. It's a clear sign of how the global food system prioritizes exports and profits over local access. Big farms that have better tech, irrigation, and government support are thriving while smaller farmers using traditional methods are getting left behind. They're often shut out of the more profitable markets because they can't produce at the same scale or with the same consistency. And when they finally have a good harvest, prices can crash from oversupply, so they end up making the least money when they have the most to sell. Sometimes, perfectly good food even goes to waste just because selling it isn't worth it, showing how broken it is when profit matters more than feeding people.

Commodification

Avocados have blown up as a global health trend. They're seen everywhere as healthy, clean, and essential to a "wellness" lifestyle. But behind that polished image is a much messier reality. To keep up with demand, forests are being cut down, water is being drained, and harmful chemicals are being sprayed. At the same time, people are being pushed off their land, workers are underpaid or mistreated, and in some areas, cartels have taken over the industry through violence and extortion. There's a big gap between how avocados are sold to us and the damage they leave behind, and it highlights a bigger issue of how easily trendy "healthy" foods can hide exploitation when we're not paying attention to where our food really comes from. The popularity of avocados also shows how much of our food system relies on global supply chains that are complex and often hidden. Most people buying avocados in the U.S. or Europe aren't aware of the violence, labor abuse, or environmental harm tied to their purchase. And it's not easy to find out. Unfortunately, the food system is designed to prioritize profit. This is why in

countries like Mexico, where avocados are grown, many locals can't afford to buy them. Globally, food is treated as a commodity first and a necessity to live second. Perfectly edible food gets wasted while others go hungry, not because there isn't enough food, but because the system doesn't serve those who can't pay. To fix this, we need more transparency. Consumers deserve to know where their food comes from and at what cost. But change also has to come from the ground up. Consumers can help by choosing better options and doing more research where their food comes from. While a full boycott could hurt small farmers, making thoughtful, informed choices is one step toward a more just food system, one where people and the planet come before profits.

Solutions

In Michoacán and Jalisco, Mexico, communities are pushing back against the environmental and social damage caused by the avocado industry. Avocados grown for export have led to massive deforestation and illegal water use. Some Indigenous leaders and residents who've tried to protect their forests and water have faced threats, violence, and even death. (*Mexico: Avocados for Export Fueling Deforestation and Abuse: U.S. and Mexican Governments, Corporations Failing to Ensure Sustainable Supply Chains*) One specific example is the town of Cherán in Michoacán as mentioned in *The Problem with Avocados*- The Food Empowerment Project. The community stood up against corruption and criminal activity tied to avocado-related logging, kicked out the local authorities, established self-rule, and banned commercial avocado planting to protect their forests. There have also been calls for more sustainable practices, like creating better certification systems that prevent avocados grown on illegally deforested land from entering major markets like the U.S. One idea is to match orchard maps with satellite imagery to block exports from recently cleared areas. Mexico proposed this

in 2021, but the U.S. didn't act on it. Still, groups like the Food Empowerment Project encourage consumers to support ethical importers that work directly with small-scale Mexican farmers. These approaches could help make the avocado industry more transparent and responsible, but so far, progress has been slow and limited. Even though government support is limited, grassroots movements in Mexico are proving that local action can make a real difference. The story of Cherán is a great example of how powerful community-driven efforts can be. Some have suggested boycotting avocados, but that could hurt the families who rely on avocado farming for their livelihood. A better solution might be to empower these communities through legal protections, financial support, and environmental safeguards. Policies that ensure fair wages, prevent criminal influence, and encourage cooperative farming could help bring more balance to the system. In the end, achieving food justice means questioning the systems that turn basic food into luxury goods. By supporting local movements, demanding more transparency, and calling for real reforms, we can help create a food system that prioritizes fairness, sustainability, and dignity for everyone involved.

Conclusion

The rise and trend of the avocado as a symbol of health has come at a significant social and environmental cost. The growing demand for this "superfood" has led to deforestation, water scarcity, worker exploitation, and violence, particularly in Mexico. Achieving food justice requires challenging a global food system that values profit over people and the planet. To create a more equitable and sustainable food system, consumers, governments, and corporations must demand greater transparency, support community-driven efforts, and implement policies that prioritize fairness and environmental protection. Only through collective action can we ensure that the food we consume nourishes both people and the Earth.

(ALL information from this essay came from these sources)

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