

Palm Oil – the all-pervasive controversial ingredient!

Palm oil is the most widely used vegetable oil on Earth being found in around 50% of supermarket products, from food to cleaners to cosmetics. It is widely used for its properties and because it is cheap. Its low price is partly due to its high yield, but also because, as with other mass-produced crops, the environmental and social costs are neglected.

The major drawback of oil palm plantations is that they are developed in low lying, wet, tropical areas – exactly where rainforests grow and endangered species such as orangutan and tigers once thrived.

Deforestation in these areas is pushing the orangutan closer to the brink of extinction due to 80% of their habitat being destroyed in the last 20 years. The list of other mammals affected includes elephants, rhinos and tigers as well as thousands of other less-well known animal and plant species.



According to Ethical Consumer, between 1990 and 2010, 8.7 million acres of rainforest in Indonesia, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea were cleared for palm plantations, an area nearly twice the size of Wales. Indonesia, the world's largest producer of palm oil, has seen a 600% growth in the area covered by plantations over roughly the same period, associated with the loss of 40% of its lowland rainforests. The industry is now expanding into the rainforests of Central Africa, with more than a million acres under imminent threat.

Destruction of forests results in biodiversity and habitat loss, species extinction and drives climate change.

N.B. Despite palm oil proliferation being a major cause of deforestation and habitat destruction, animal agriculture is an even bigger problem, with the latter being responsible for up to 91% of Amazon destruction and the leading cause of habitat destruction and species extinction globally.

As at 2014, 27 million acres of rainforest had been cleared for palm oil production whereas 136 million acres had been cleared for animal agriculture (mainly for beef farming and animal feed crops).

Social impacts of palm oil are also wide-ranging, and profits are far from evenly distributed. More than 20 million people, comprising hundreds of distinct language groups, depend on Indonesia's forests. Many traditional communities have lost their lands to plantations. The Indonesian National Lands Agency registered over 3,000 conflicts between palm oil companies and communities in 2013, and the drafting in of migrant labour for plantations causes further problems. In 2014 the US Department of Labour listed palm oil as one of 55 goods produced globally by forced (i.e. slave)

labour. It is estimated that there are between 72,000 and 200,000 children working on palm plantations in Malaysia.

What is being done?

In 2004, initiated by the WWF, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was established to develop and implement environmental and social standards for the industry. Its 2000+ members are mostly processors, traders and consumer goods manufacturers, but also include growers, retailers, NGOs and investors.

However, the organisation has received widespread criticism for weak standards and failure to enforce. This has led campaigning organisations to pressure companies into going further than RSPO requirements, including commitments to deforestation and peat-free palm oil and conflict-free palm oil.

In December 2014, a long-campaigned-for European law was introduced, which requires palm oil to be specifically labelled on food packaging rather than just called 'vegetable oil'. But still only half of all Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO) is bought as such, with the rest selling for the lower price of uncertified oil. Not exactly an incentive for growers to switch to sustainable production.

What can we do?

As consumers we can avoid the worst offending companies, but we can also help by lobbying the industry to be more responsible.

Environmentalists do not recommend boycotting of palm oil completely because it is an incredibly high-yielding vegetable oil, which means that anything replacing it will have to use more land, which does not solve the issue of deforestation and associated land use change.

What organisations like Ethical Consumer and Greenpeace do recommend is that we only buy products containing **organic AND RSPO-certified sustainable** palm oil. Ethical Consumer has put together a useful list of companies and products which are either palm oil free or which only use certified sustainable or organic palm oil.

www.ethicalconsumer.org/shoppingethically/palmoilfreelist.aspx

Since animal agriculture is an even larger threat to our rainforests than palm oil, cutting down your meat consumption and incorporating more vegetarian (or, better still vegan) meals into your diet will also help reduce deforestation and its associated problems.