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Palm Oil: the 'threat' in our shopping trolley

Background

It is little known that **palm oil is a part of everyday life**. It is almost impossible to avoid purchasing products in supermarkets, pharmacies or confectionary shops without palm oil¹. It is in ice cream, chocolate, biscuits, crackers, chips, margarine, fruit juice, batters, soap, toothpaste, laundry powders, detergents, cosmetics, pet food. It has also been touted as a biofuel – though palm oil-based diesel actually increases greenhouse emissions².

Palm-oil diesel was **until recently hailed as a safe**, renewable alternative to petroleum, but it has been found that the carbon released from peat swamps in Indonesia and Malaysia – drained and burned to allow plantations of palm oil trees – released 2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide a year into the atmosphere, or 8% of the world's fossil fuel emissions. Some of the richest and most bio-diverse forests in Indonesia will soon be opened up for commercial exploitation under a plan drafted by the new government of Aceh³.

We may be **unwittingly contributing** to the devastation of Indonesian and Malaysian wildlife-rich forests, where orang-utans and other species face extinction as their habitat disappears; the loss of livelihood, culture and the tradition life of indigenous people; and, climate change itself. The destruction palm causes is no longer a distant problem. This problem is in our shopping trolley. 'Its bitter fruits are found in our shopping trolleys'⁴.

The consequences of its growth have not been grasped by the industry. Consumer pressure, industry leadership and political incentives are required to permanently place these

tropical rainforests off limits⁵. The impact on wildlife in Malaysia and Indonesia, where rainforests are being cleared, is catastrophic as the habitat of endangered species is being torn down, the livelihoods of tribes destroyed, and seriously contributes to the warming of the planet. The **unsustainable expansion** of the palm oil industry may seem a remote problem, but its solution might be the shopping trolley⁶.

Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)

In 2003 the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was established in an attempt to slow down this destruction. Bringing together growers, transporters and consumers of palm oil, **criteria were set** for companies seeking to brand their oil as 'sustainable'. Still, by 2009, only a trickle of 'certified' palm oil has entered the marketplace. RSPO members freely admit that it has failed to achieve its objectives, whilst member companies in Indonesia use the organisation for 'green washing' as they destroy rainforests with impunity⁷. To date, companies have managed to avoid much scrutiny over the damage palm oil is causing. It is 'only' the native peoples, the orang-utans and the other rainforest animals that have experienced the most profound changes so far⁸.

Environmental Degradation

According to Greenpeace⁹ the burning of South-east Asia's peat forests for palm-oil plantations – put 1.8bn tonnes of greenhouse gas into the atmosphere: 4% of global climate-change emissions from 0.1% of the Earth 'but some companies are still trying to look the other way'^{10,11}.



Wholesale rainforest destruction will not only destroy one of the last great wildernesses, its rare animals and the people who live there, but will threaten people living in the West as developed countries experience temperature extremes (hot and cold), more flooding, droughts, water shortages, more food poisoning and skin cancer. Ocean waters will not only sweep over Kiribati, Tuvalu, Bangladesh and the Maldives, but threaten developed countries¹².

Destruction of Indonesian rainforests for new palm oil plantations **is not necessary**. About 300–700 million hectares of abandoned land is available but there are profits in logging and transportation. Palm oil continues to be used because it is 10 times more productive per hectare than other crop such as soybean, sunflower or rapeseed, and because of its versatility and abundance¹³.

The Dayak Peoples

Indigenous people, known in Borneo as **Dayaks**, are threatened. About 10,000 members of the semi-nomadic Penan tribe survive but their traditional lifestyle

– which includes harvesting the starchy sago tree – is being threatened¹⁴. A billion hectares of Dayak land and forest in Borneo (Kalimantan) have become palm oil plantations to serve the world market – land ‘stolen’ from the Dayaks¹⁵. It has also meant loss of life in the immediate term, and loss of culture and tradition in the long term¹⁶.

Threats to Species

Illegal logging, fires and clearances have decimated the rainforest which is the exclusive home of the primates. The **Borneo orang-utan** is listed as ‘highly endangered’¹⁷ like its Sumatran cousin, which is critically endangered¹⁸. The orang-utan, a potent symbol of the human’s kinship with nature¹⁹ is the greatest victim of the rapidly expanding palm oil trade. Whilst some are kept as pets or smuggled to be sold to perform in circuses, the ‘real issue’ is palm oil plantations^{20,21}.

Devastating fires, caused by forest-clearing for palm oil plantations have robbed the orang-utans of perhaps 30% of their habitat in Borneo. Those fires briefly drew attention to the orang-utan’s plight in Borneo and Sumatra orang-utan, but land is still being converted at a rate of at least 1,000 sq miles a year and Indonesia has announced plans to raze an area half the size of the Netherlands to create the world’s biggest palm oil plantation²².

Rainforests are being cleared at the rate of **300 football fields per hour** to make way for oil palm plantations. Uncontrolled burning by companies to clear the land results in thousands of orang-utans being burned to death. These rainforests are honeypots for flora and fauna, among the most bio-diverse places on Earth^{23,24}.

The orang-utan is so endangered that many experts believe that it will become **extinct** in the wild within a decade – destroyed – by the rush to produce an environmentally friendly fuel. About

5,000 perish annually as the rainforests on which they depend are felled²⁵.

The Indonesian government is trying to **persuade companies** to put their plantations on already deforested and degraded land, but with little success as they can get a double dividend from virgin forests, first by selling the timber, and then from harvesting palm oil cultivated on the cleared ground²⁶.

What can we do?

It is difficult to know which products contain sustainable palm oil. At present, less than 7% of total production is currently certified as sustainable. Manufacturers **may claim** to be using certified sustainable palm oil (CSPO) because of membership of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil or products are supplied by members, but this is **no guarantee** as members only need commit to ‘working towards’ producing a sustainable product²⁷.

There are a number of things we do:

- Check the ingredients for palm oil (usually labelled as vegetable oil or fat) and check with the manufacturer if it certified sustainable palm oil (CSPO). If not, seek an alternative product.
- Write letters to retailers and the government expressing concern and demand change. You’ll find sample letters on the Palm Oil Action Group site²⁸.
- Go to the **Truth in Labelling**²⁹ website and check the progress on a campaign to label palm oil in Australia.
- Inform your family, friends and colleagues³⁰.
- Obtain a list of products which are palm oil free, go to <http://www.orangutans.com.au/Orangutans-Survival-Information/Helping-you-buy-responsibly-Palm-oil-free-alternatives.aspx>.

Public pressure can bring change. It can work. We know it can work. It has worked³¹.

Resources

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Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website www.erc.org.au



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