

An aerial photograph showing a lush green rainforest on the left and a cleared, brownish area on the right. A large, dark log lies horizontally across the middle of the image, partially obscuring the forest edge. A small orange excavator is visible on the left side of the log.

THE CASE AGAINST CONFLICT PALM OIL

A FACT SHEET

Palm oil touches our lives every time we take a trip to the supermarket. Palm oil and its derivatives are ubiquitous, found in roughly half of all packaged goods, and used in a wide array of processed foods, including ice cream, cookies, crackers, chocolate products, cereals, breakfast bars, cake mixes, doughnuts, potato chips, instant noodles, frozen sweets and meals, baby formula, margarine, and dry and canned soups.

In the U.S. alone, palm oil imports have jumped 485% in the last decade. The dramatic and growing demand for this vegetable oil in recent decades has pushed sprawling Conflict Palm Oil plantations deep into some of the world's most valuable rainforests. Conflict Palm Oil production is now one of the leading causes of rainforest destruction around the globe.

Conflict Palm Oil production is also responsible for human rights violations as corporations often forcefully remove Indigenous Peoples and rural communities from their lands. Tragically, child labor and modern day slavery are all too common on Conflict Palm Oil plantations in both Indonesia and Malaysia.

But Conflict Palm Oil is not only a problem at the plantation level. The clearing of rainforests and carbon-rich peatlands for new plantations is releasing globally impactful carbon pollution, making Conflict Palm Oil a major driver of human induced climate change.

RAINFOREST DESTRUCTION

Nearly 90% percent of the world's palm oil is grown in the tropical countries of Indonesia and Malaysia, where currently, palm oil plantations under active cultivation cover 16 million acres, an area similar in size to West Virginia.

The Indonesian government has announced plans to convert approximately 44 million more acres of rainforests, an area the size of Missouri, into palm oil plantations by 2020. The UN's Environment Program (UNEP) indicates, "98% of Indonesia's forest may be destroyed by 2022, the lowland forest much sooner."

Rainforest destruction for Conflict Palm Oil expansion is spreading quickly to other valuable rainforest regions such as in Central and West Africa and Latin America.



A baby Sumatran elephant; Sumatran orangutan.
PHOTO: PAUL HILTON



ENDANGERED SPECIES AND THE LOSS OF BIODIVERSITY

Indonesia's rainforests are one of earth's most biologically and culturally rich landscapes. Incredibly, with just 1 percent of the Earth's land area, Indonesia's rainforests contain 10% of the world's known plants, 12% of mammals and 17% of all known bird species.

As recently as the 1960s, about 80% of Indonesia was forested. Sadly, Indonesia now has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world, with just under half of the country's original forest cover remaining. Conservative studies suggest more than 2.4 million acres of Indonesian rainforest is cleared and lost each year.

The rainforests of Borneo and Sumatra are the last stand for one of humankind's closest relatives, the orangutan. Orangutans face an extreme risk of extinction within our lifetime. Between 2004-08, the Sumatran orangutan population fell by 14% to 6,600, largely due to loss of habitat for Conflict Palm Oil expansion. The critically endangered Sumatran tiger and Sumatran rhinoceros, both with populations of only hundreds left in the wild, are also urgently threatened by Conflict Palm Oil expansion.

The critically important Leuser Ecosystem is among the most ancient and life-rich ecosystems ever documented by science, and is the last place on Earth where Sumatran orangutans, elephants, tigers, rhinos and sun bears still roam the same habitat. Located mostly within the province of Aceh on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra, the Leuser Ecosystem is by every measure a world-class hotspot of biodiversity and is widely acknowledged to be among the most important areas of intact rainforest left in all of Southeast Asia. But the Leuser Ecosystem exists at a tenuous crossroads. Despite being technically protected under Indonesian national law, industrial development for Conflict Palm Oil, as well as other extractive industries, continue to threaten the entire ecosystem, as well as the wellbeing of millions of Acehnese people who depend on it for their food, water and livelihoods.

LABOR RIGHTS

There are an estimated 3.5 million workers on palm oil plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia, and a growing body of documentation detailing the all too common abuses suffered by palm oil workers in the exploitative, extractive Conflict Palm Oil industry.

Workers on Conflict Palm Oil plantations are cheated out of fair pay and benefits, exposed to toxic chemicals, forced to bring their children and spouses to work and are even sometimes trafficking and enslaved by plantations--their passports seized and held in a perpetual state of debt bondage. The US Department of Labor includes palm oil from Malaysia and Indonesia on their "List of Goods Produced By Child Labor or Forced Child Labor."



FOREST COMMUNITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Corporate land grabbing of Indigenous and community forests for Conflict Palm Oil plantations is responsible for serious human rights abuses and persistent conflicts between companies and rural communities.

In Indonesia there are over 500 different language groups and between 60 and 110 million Indigenous peoples, many of whom depend on standing natural forests for their livelihoods.

The Indonesian palm oil monitoring group SawitWatch has identified 663 ongoing land disputes between palm oil companies and rural communities. In too many cases, private armies and paramilitaries have been deployed and community members have been killed for Conflict Palm Oil.

THE SOLUTION: RESPONSIBLE PALM OIL

Consumers are often misled by “RSPO certified” or “Green Palm” labels. These labels from the Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) still allow “certified sustainable” palm oil producers to destroy rainforests and carbon-rich peatlands and violate the rights of communities and workers. Companies that produce, trade and use palm oil must go beyond these inadequate RSPO standards to be truly responsible. Rainforest Action Network founded the Palm Oil Innovation Group (POIG) to demonstrate that palm oil can be produced responsibly.

Responsible palm oil is produced without contributing to rainforest or peatland destruction, species extinction, greenhouse gas emissions or labor rights and human rights abuses. Food manufacturing companies need transparent and traceable supply chains, from the plantation where the palm oil was sourced to the final product on your grocery store shelf.



PHOTO: PAUL HILTON

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