

POINT OF VIEW

Victims of Palm Oil: Wildlife, People and Our Planet

By Nancy Roberts

It's in thousands of consumer products and nearly impossible to avoid, yet its production causes untold suffering to wildlife, indigenous people and the planet's atmosphere: palm oil is a big problem. Palm oil plantations are created by destroying rain forests, harming watersheds and destroying the forest resources that millions of indigenous people rely upon. Every time we wash our hands, apply lipstick or eat a chip, we risk being complicit in the destruction of precious trees, lives, and air.

Think you don't buy palm oil products? You probably do. Palm oil is in half of all products commonly found in supermarkets and comprises 35 percent of the global vegetable oil market. It is commonly used in shampoo, soap, processed foods, candy, even biofuel. Palm oil imports to the U.S. have tripled between 2005 and 2009, with increasing demand also in China, India and elsewhere. That skyrocketing demand has created three big palm oil victims: people, wildlife and the planet.

Harming the Planet: Palm Oil's Role in Global Warming

Indonesia and Malaysia have the largest tropical forests in Asia and are also the world's primary palm oil producers. According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, tropical forest destruction accounts for 15 percent of global warming pollution; palm oil cultivation is one of the major causes of tropical rainforest destruction. As vast swaths of forest and swamp are obliterated to make way for plantations, thousands of tons of carbon dioxide is released. More carbon dioxide is released when peat swamps are drained and dried out to make way for palm cultivation.

Hurting Lives: Communities Disrupted and Destroyed by Palm Oil

Entire communities are destroyed or thrown into poverty as plantations gut the livelihood of people who have relied on the forest's resources for hundreds of years. In the rush to acquire land to create mega plantations, traditional land rights and community customs are being violated. Rainforest Action Network describes barriers that native farmers experience in Indonesia: "When the small farmers complain to the government that their land has been stolen, they are shown papers that prove that the land their families had farmed for generations was now owned by [agribusinesses] Cargill or ADM/Wilmar."

Devastating Wildlife: Habitat Destruction and Palm Oil

The tropical forests of Indonesia and Malaysia are home to some of the most beautiful and critically endangered creatures on earth. Elephants, tigers, rhinos and orangutans are just a some of the most visible endangered species that are being decimated by irresponsible forest clearing to make way for plantations. In addition, orangutans and other creatures considered pests are actively trapped and killed by plantation owners, who offer bounties for dead orangutans. The WWF estimates that there are fewer than 3,000 Sumatran elephants left; the species has lost 70 percent of its



habitat in the last 25 years, and 85 percent of its remaining habitat is unprotected and vulnerable to palm oil plantation expansion.

Palm oil production is destroying precious lives today. At this moment, fires raging in Indonesia threaten a colony of endangered Sumatran orangutans, after the local governor gave a palm oil company license to convert 1,600 hectares (six square miles) of peat swamp to palm plantation, causing fire to sweep the area and devastate the habitat of 200 of the rare apes.

Can palm oil be sustainable?

In 2003 the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was established to find ways to produce palm oil sustainably, without harm to environment or local communities. Standards were developed, and certified sustainable palm oil first came to market in 2008; it now comprises about 10 percent of all palm oil produced. A recent report by the WWF shows that producing certified sustainable palm oil can be a financial and environmental win. WWF's Joshua Levin reports, "Our research found that many firms who switched to producing sustainable palm oil – which is good for people and the environment – reaped significant return on their investments. In some cases, switching to sustainable production was economically transformative for the business. Producers, buyers, and investors should see sustainable palm oil as a serious business opportunity."

There is a long way to go to ensure that all palm oil, or its alternatives, is produced responsibly. As of now, it is very difficult to know if the palm oil in the products we buy is sustainably produced. Large corporations, including Nestle, Unilever, General Mills, Kraft and Procter & Gamble are major palm oil purchasers, and while many have committed to using only sustainable palm oil by 2015, progress has been slow and attaining that goal is in doubt.

Take Action

Public pressure and vigilance over corporations in support of sustainable palm oil production and labeling is essential.

Many people are unaware of the problems of palm oil. *You can make a difference:*

- Share what you know with others. The World Wildlife Fund posted a You Tube video that will help introduce the topic at www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-1DQwaaUwE.
- Read all product labels and ask stores and companies to offer products made with sustainable palm oil.
- Support shareholder resolutions on corporate sustainability and transparency.
- Support nonprofit organizations that are working to save orangutans and other threatened species.