

The Perils of Palm Oil

Written on behalf of OWL/SAFCEI by Elisa Galgut (March 2015)

What is palm oil?

Palm oil is a vegetable oil made from the pulp of the fruit of the African oil palm tree, while palm kernel oil is made from the kernel of the same fruit. Palm oil is a saturated fat, and is stable at high temperatures, which makes it an ideal oil for frying.

Where is it found?

Palm oil is used extensively in a variety of products, from pastries and cakes to soaps and cosmetics. In South Africa, it is estimated that “more than 50% of packaged consumer products contain palm oil in some form.”¹ These are just some of the items found on South Africa supermarket shelves that may contain palm oil:

Pies, biscuits, rusks, cereals, chocolate bars, potato crisps, doughnuts, margarine, cooking oil, instant noodles, ice cream, commercially-baked bread, peanut butter. Raisins are often coated in palm oil, to give them a nice sheen, and nuts may be roasted in palm oil. Many cosmetics use palm oil, such as soaps, shampoo, lip balm, lipstick, baby oil, face cream.

What's wrong with palm oil?

These ordinary products have a very dark side. The palm oil industry is responsible for massive deforestation, which has driven many iconic species to the edge of extinction. Most of the



Sarawak Borneo - stripped of its trees. Photo courtesy of C. Hollett of South African Palm Oil Awareness.

world's palm oil is derived from Indonesia and Malaysia, where rainforests are destroyed in order to make way for palm oil plantations. The *United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)* indicated in 2007 that the establishment of oil palm plantations caused widespread forest destruction in Indonesia and Malaysia. “It is estimated that between 1990 and 2005, 55-60 per cent of oil palm expansion in the two countries occurred at the expense of virgin tropical forests.”

The destruction of rainforests leads to enormous biodiversity loss; orangutans in particular have suffered greatly. These “people of the forest”, who share 97% of their DNA with us, have lost their homes via deforestation, or have been targeted as pests. During the second half of the 20th C, more than half of the forest cover on Borneo disappeared and more than 80% of the orangutan habitat was destroyed. Palm oil companies frequently use uncontrolled

¹ *The dangers of palm oil* (Moneyweb)

burning to clear the land, resulting in thousands of orangutans being burned alive, or dying from smoke inhalation. Those that survive have nowhere to live and nothing left to eat. One particularly catastrophic event was the 1997/98 forest fires in Kalimantan-a 'slash and burn' technique to clear the land for traditional agriculture - which killed up to 8,000 individuals!

At one time the world's wild orangutan populations likely included hundreds of thousands of individuals, but current estimates indicate that less than 50% of wild orangutan populations remain.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature has classified the Bornean orangutan as "endangered" and the Sumatran orangutan as "critically

endangered." *UNEP* warns that "If the immediate crisis in securing the future survival of the orangutan and the protection of national parks is not



Orangutan mother and baby. Photo courtesy of *Orangutan Foundation International*

resolved, very few wild orangutans will be left within two decades." This means that without drastic intervention, these gentle, intelligent primates may soon be extinct as biologically viable populations in the wild.

In addition to orangutans, other species, such as the Asian elephant and rhino, and the Sumatran tiger, are under threat because of palm oil. Greenpeace claims that just 400 Sumatran tigers remain in the wild.³ Without intervention to stop the spread of deforestation due to palm oil, these Asian cats could soon be extinct.



Border of Lambir National park cleared for palm oil. Photo courtesy of C. Hollett of South African Palm Oil Awareness.

² The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *The Last Stand of the Orangutan*

³ See Greenpeace's *License to Kill*



Casualties of the palm oil industry: young orphaned orangutans being cared for by *Orangutan Foundation International*. Photo courtesy of *OFI*.

Indigenous People

The *International Land Coalition* argues that “indigenous peoples have lost extensive tracts of land” due to palm oil production in Southeast Asia. They maintain that this has resulted in “serious human rights abuses”⁴ as companies appropriate land which has traditionally belonged to indigenous peoples.

What can I do?

Although the palm oil problem seems overwhelming, there are ways we can act to ameliorate the situation.

Avoid buying products with palm oil. Although this may not be possible all the time, knowing what

⁴ *Palm Oil and Indigenous Peoples in South East*

products to avoid will aid in deciding what not to buy, or in finding alternatives. See below for a list of palm-oil-derived ingredients commonly found in food and other products.

Encourage companies to find alternatives to palm oil. The more consumers indicate their awareness of the problem with palm oil, the more will manufacturers make ethically informed choices.

Encourage retailers that do use palm oil to find substitutes, or to buy *RSPO*-endorsed palm oil.

RSPO stands for the *Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil*. It is a “global, multi-stakeholder initiative on sustainable palm oil.” Members... come from different back-grounds, including plantation companies, traders, consumer goods manufacturers and retailers of palm oil products, social and environmental NGOs, from many countries that produce or use palm oil. The *RSPO* vision is to “transform the markets by making sustainable palm oil the norm.” Although the *RSPO* is not without its critics, many NGOs believe it is important to support its endeavours to provide sustainable palm oil.

Thank companies that do not use palm oil in their products. This will both encourage them not to use palm oil in the future, and it will alert them to the fact that consumers know - and care - about the use of palm oil.

Spread the word! Inform your schools, your friends, your community groups, and your places of worship. The more people know about the perils of palm oil, the more we can do to stop the destruction. Let us all heed the words attributed to the statesman Edmund Burke: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing."

Palm oil by any other name ...

There are hundreds of chemical names for palm oil derivatives; here are a few of the most common: Palm Oil, Palm Fruit Oil, Palm Kernel, Palm Stearine, Palmate, Palmitate, Palmitic Acid, Palmityl Alcohol, Cetyl Palmitate, Elaeis Guineensis, Ethylhexyl Palmitate, Hydrated Palm Glycerides, Octyl Palmitate, Palmitoyl Oxostearamide, Sodium Kernelate, Sodium Palm Kernelate, Sodium Palmate

If a product's saturated fat content is over 40% of its total fat content, it will most likely have palm oil in it.

Resources:

The Last Stand of the Orangutan - <http://www.grida.no/files/publications/orangutan-full.pdf>

The dangers of palm oil - <http://www.moneyweb.co.za/archive/the-dangers-of-palm-oil/>

Orangutan Foundation International - <http://orangutan.org/>

See here for *OFI's* report on palm oil - <http://orangutan.org/palmoil/>

http://www.unep.org/publications/search/pub_details_s.asp?ID=3920

<http://orangutan.org/rainforest/the-effects-of-palm-oil/>

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/rainforestactionnetwork/pages/2367/attachments/original/1405470759/conflict_palm_oil_lowres_%281%29.compressed.pdf?1405470759

<http://orangutan.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/3-Easy-Ways-to-Kick-Palm-Oil-Our-of-Your-Life.pdf>

http://www.unep.org/pdf/Dec_11_Palm_Plantations.pdf

Greenpeace: *License to Kill*-

http://www.greenpeace.org/international/Global/international/publications/forests/2013/LicenceToKill_ENG_LOWRES.pdf

South African Palm Oil Awareness on Facebook

<http://www.worldwildlife.org/industries/palm-oil>

Palm Oil and Indigenous Peoples in South East Asia: http://www.landcoalition.org/sites/default/files/publication/912/FPP_Malaysia_Indonesia_web_11.03.11.pdf