



In the palm of your hands

Make-up, food, biofuels – palm oil gets into everything. Yet the unchecked cultivation of this high-yielding crop is driving the destruction of the rainforest, damaging wildlife habitats and distorting economies. Breathe hears first-hand from conservationists trying to reverse the trend

I peered eagerly out of the window as our plane descended towards the runway at Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur International airport. Dense green forests covered the land as far as I could see, a verdant but nonetheless industrial landscape. For this gloriously lush vista is a vast expanse of palm oil plantations.

Indeed, if you go on to explore Peninsular Malaysia by bus, it's impossible to estimate the number of perfectly trimmed palm trees covering the rolling hills that were once home to diverse flora and fauna. Breaks in the vegetation reveal plots of land burned to a crisp, the charred remnants of rainforest razed to the ground in preparation for fresh planting, and sections of terrain dotted with newly planted palms.

Why palm oil?

Ninety per cent of all palm oil production is in Malaysia and Indonesia. It is derived from the ripened fruit of the African oil palm, which is pulped and transformed into oil. A high-yielding crop, it produces more oil per hectare than alternatives such as sunflower, coconut, rapeseed or soybean. But it comes at a price. A high one. To create a palm oil plantation the indigenous forest is chopped down and the native wildlife, including orangutan, tigers and elephants, are killed, captured or driven away. Lower-yielding alternatives, on the other hand, can be grown in areas that are not home to endangered species.

Palm oil's high yield and low cost makes it an attractive option for manufacturers and it is widely used in myriad products. It is found in foods including margarine, chocolate, ice cream and popcorn and toiletries such as soap, toothpaste, shampoo and lipstick. It's even used in baby formula, dog food and biofuels. You might not always see it on the food labels, however, as it's often described in generic terms such as vegetable oil or vegetable fat. Its usage is so widespread that the industry is expected to be worth more than £751billion by 2022, according to a report published by US-based market research and consulting firm Grand View Research.

Lost habitat

The demand for palm oil is driving untrammelled deforestation. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) estimates that each hour about 300 football fields of forest are cleared to make way for palm oil plantations. Its 2018 *The Living Planet Report* highlights that wildlife has decreased by 60 per cent worldwide since 1970 and that the habitats of the

critically endangered Pygmy elephants, Sumatran rhinos, sun bears, orangutans, tigers and proboscis monkeys, all native to Malaysia and Indonesia, have been destroyed. It added that Sumatra had already lost 12.5 million hectares of natural forest between 1985 and 2010. Without drastic change, the Sumatran rainforest could disappear within the next two decades.

Danielle Khan Da Silva, co-founder of the Sumatran Wildlife Sanctuary on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, has witnessed the negative impacts of the palm oil industry. 'Palm oil production is devoid of a regenerative relationship with the land,' she says. 'Sumatra is a small island, vulnerable to natural disasters as a result of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis. The more land cultivated for palm oil, the weaker the integrity of the island's natural defence systems become.'

In Sumatra, however, palm oil production is also the main source of employment and the industry has helped to reduce the number of Malaysians and Indonesians living in poverty. For this reason Danielle does not suggest a ban on its production. But she does worry about the impact palm oil cultivation has on other aspects of the local economy and community. 'People who live in villages that rely on the land





feel the effects of the palm oil industry,' she explains. 'Their water sources become more scarce and the integrity of the land on which they survive degrades. People are feeling these negative impacts and realising that the devastation needs to slow down significantly if it can't [be] stopped.'

This will require a move away from unsustainable palm oil production as well as the provision of alternative employment opportunities in areas such as conservation. The Sumatran Wildlife Sanctuary, for instance, which protects 50 acres of rainforest in Sumatra, is a refuge for the critically endangered Sumatran orangutan, tiger, elephant and rhino. 'The land we've protected on the border of the Gunung Leuser [National Park] ecosystem would have been turned into a palm-oil plantation if we hadn't purchased it,' reveals Danielle. 'It would have been a perfect avenue for more illegal palm oil expansion.'

Ethical avenues

Greenpeace is among the organisations campaigning for the palm oil industry to reform itself, claiming it's 'now or never' for producers and suppliers to make lasting changes. Sustainable palm oil could be part of the solution. In 2011, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) established the Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO) trademark. It now certifies 19 per cent of the world's palm oil. To qualify

for the CSPO trademark, plantations must meet the strict environmental and social operating criteria laid down by RSPO. These prohibit the establishment of plantations in primary and virgin forests, in areas whose biodiversity includes rare or endangered species, and places where the ecosystem is fragile. It also limits the use of fire for deforestation.

The impact of these regulations is still being evaluated. In June last year, the scientific journal, *Environmental Research Letters*, reported no difference in orangutan decline between RSPO-certified and non-certified palm oil plantations over the period 2009 to 2014. Secondary forests and peat forests were allowed to be cleared by certified sustainable plantations until late last year. In the last quarter of 2018, however, RSPO announced a total ban on all deforestation and gave existing members a one-year transition period to implement the new standards, which also include a commitment not to cultivate carbon-rich peatlands or to exploit indigenous communities.

This will require greater oversight than perhaps has been the case previously. Research by the Zoological Society of London, which assessed 70 of the largest palm oil producers, reported that some committed to zero-deforestation were failing to enforce it on the ground. Danielle claims to have seen this in Sumatra where certified-sustainable palm oil plantations have illegally expanded on National Park rainforest land.

Consumer action

Individuals can reduce their consumption of palm oil by seeking out products that have one of three reputable palm-oil free labels: the Orangutan Alliance No Palm Oil certification, Palm Oil Free trademark and the Palm Oil Investigations' POI Approved sticker. Consumers could also lobby companies to find solutions to mitigate the negative impacts of the industry and demand an approach that demonstrates deforestation-free standards, insists upon the protection of human and animal rights, and enforces transparent supply chains and clear product labelling.

Together, we can insist that the manufacturers of palm oil both commit to and implement processes that protect natural animal habitats, foster healthy ecosystems and create positive economic opportunities for local communities. Maybe then the planet's long-term future and biodiversity will stand a chance.

To find out more about the Sumatran Wildlife Sanctuary, visit sumatranwildlifesanctuary.org. To learn more about the impact of the palm oil industry, go to worldwildlife.org

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PALM OIL: LOOK OUT FOR THE HIDDEN INGREDIENT

Follow these tips to work out where palm oil's lurking and to find ways to make a difference

- There are more than 200 terms for palm oil including vegetable oil, vegetable fat, palmate, glyceryl, stearic acid, elaeis guineensis and sodium kernelate.
- Avoid processed foods because many packaged goods contain palm oil.
- Buy snacks and beauty products that are made with local ingredients.
- Cook with plant-based oils, such as sunflower, rapeseed, coconut, soybean or olive, cultivated in small batches by responsible local farmers.
- Support grocery stores that use products carrying one of the sustainable palm oil certifications.
- Encourage companies to be transparent about their use of palm oil and lobby governments for more precise labelling of ingredients.