

PALM OIL – AN INDUSTRY WITH DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES

Barbara Sykes raises serious ecological and social issues surrounding this growing industry

The rapid rise in the palm oil industry in recent years gives rise to major questions about the social and ecological risks of its production. The industry is linked to major issues such as deforestation, habitat degradation, climate change, animal cruelty and indigenous rights abuses in the countries where it is produced.

Palm oil is a very productive crop, offering a far greater yield at a lower cost of production than other vegetable oils. Now the most commonly produced vegetable oil, it is used in half of all supermarket products, hidden in a wide range of everyday products including pizzas, biscuits, margarine, ice cream, chocolate and pet food, as well as body creams, soaps, makeup, candles and detergent, and biofuel.

The warm, humid climate of the tropics offers perfect growth conditions for oil palms. Daily, huge tracts of rainforest in Southeast Asia, Latin America and Africa are being bulldozed or torched to make room for more plantations, releasing vast amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. 85% of all palm oil globally produced is exported from Indonesia and Malaysia; most of the time not using sustainable measures.

Indonesia's rainforests and peatlands are among the world's most species-rich environments and home to numerous endangered plants and animals, such as orangutans, Sumatran tigers and Bornean rhinos. As their forest habitat is cleared, these are being pushed closer to extinction; the orangutan could become extinct in the wild within the next 5-10 years, and Sumatran tigers in less than 3 years.

Smallholders and indigenous people who have inhabited and protected the forest for generations are often brutally driven from their land. In Indonesia, more than 700 land conflicts are related to the palm oil industry. Human rights violations, including child labour, are everyday occurrences. According to the World Wildlife Fund, an area the equivalent size of 300 football fields of rain forest is cleared each hour to make way for palm oil production.

What can we do as consumers?

1. Read labels: EU labelling regulations require food products to clearly indicate that they contain palm oil. However, a wide range of chemical names may still be used to hide the use of palm oil in non-food items such as cosmetics and cleaning products.
2. Ethical Consumer has a list of Palm Oil Free and Sustainable Palm Oil Products, including a list of supermarkets and companies receiving their best rating either for being a palm oil free company or for only using certified sustainable or organic palm oil. (<http://www.ethicalconsumer.org/shoppingethically/palmoilfreelist.aspx>)
3. Ask your retailers for palm oil-free products. Write to product manufacturers. Public pressure and increased awareness of the problem have already prompted some producers to stop using palm oil.

4. Sign petitions and write to your elected representatives: Online campaigns put pressure on policymakers responsible for biofuels and palm oil imports. E.g. www.rainforest-rescue.org
5. Look for products with Fairtrade Palm oil www.traidcraft.co.uk/

(This article has also been published in the Kbt Parish Church magazine)