

Sustainability Series Episode 4: The Problem with Palm Oil?

Remember the [Rangtang](#) video from a few years ago highlighting the destruction of orangutan habitats due to palm oil production? My reaction, like so many others, was to immediately decide to boycott palm oil. But then I kept hearing that this was not going to solve the problems caused by palm oil... Conflicted and confused, I did some research. This article explains what I found out about what's really going on- what is so bad about palm oil and what can be done about it.

Some history and context

Human use of palm oil is nothing new. Palm oil, which comes from the palm fruit which grows on a tree native to West Africa, was used thousands of years ago in burial procedures in Egypt. In the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries the uses of palm oil expanded and exports to Europe grew over time with increased demand for things like edible oils, industrial lubricants and candles. A global demand for palm oil then really exploded in the 1990s with a rising demand for processed food and increased consumerism.

Today palm oil is the most widely used vegetable oil. It is thought to be in over [60% of all supermarket products and cosmetics](#), mainly in processed food. (See extra resources section below for information on other uses of palm oil). Palm oil is used in so many things because of its versatile properties- it is what can make your crisps more crispy, your chocolate spread smooth, your lipstick silky, your shampoo frothy, and it even stops your ice cream from melting. Palm oil is also a healthier alternative in processed food compared to alternatives (like butter) due to it being low in saturated fats, and it is also a natural food preservative. It is estimated that, globally, [each person uses an average of 8kg of palm oil annually](#) and, by 2020, it's predicted that the [world will quadruple its use of palm oil](#) compared to 2015 levels.

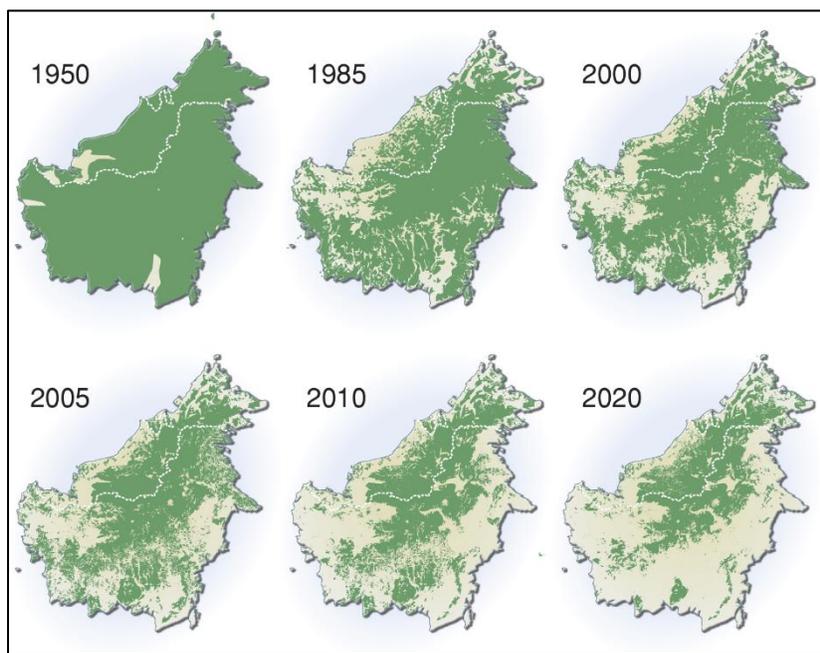
What's the problem?

A growing global demand for palm oil has caused (and is causing) a number of environmental and social issues, with the worst effect of these likely to be experienced in the countries where palm oil is grown. Currently [85% of palm oil comes from Malaysia and Indonesia](#), with the remainder coming from other tropic countries like Thailand, Colombia, Nigeria, Guatemala, Papua New Guinea, and Ecuador.

To make room for enough palm oil plantations to feed a growing demand, tropical rainforests are cleared. Burning down rainforests, and also converting peatland into palm oil plantations, releases greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere, and is a

major contributor of climate change. Deforestation is actually the [main source of greenhouse gas emissions in Indonesia](#). The image below illustrates the sheer scale of deforestation in Borneo due to palm oil production. Deforestation for palm oil production is also, by ruining natural habits putting many species at risk of extinction- palm oil production is affecting [190 species on the IUCN's red list](#) of threatened species.

By displacing room for other crops, palm oil production is also leading to food scarcity in some of the poorest countries in the world, and is also [believed to be linked to human rights abuses and land confiscations in some places](#).



Extent of deforestation in Borneo 1900–2005, and projections towards 2020. The loss of rainforest in Borneo between 1950 and recent times is largely attributed to the expansion of oil palm monocultures.
Source: <https://grid-arendal.herokuapp.com/resources/8324>

What needs to be done about the problem?

If it's so bad, why haven't we banned palm oil? Well, firstly, easier said than done. With palm oil so embedded into our everyday lives, it's hardly going to go anywhere any time soon. Iceland realised how hard it was to ban palm oil all-together after its commitment to do so and, instead, removed their labelling from products containing palm oil. Even for the most ethical of consumers, avoiding products containing palm oil can be really difficult (Palm Oil Investigations say [only about 10% of products containing palm oil actually contain the word 'palm' in their ingredients list](#)).

Secondly, palm oil production is also very embedded into the countries where production takes place. Malaysia, for example, advocates for the growth of the palm oil industry and credits its progress in poverty eradication and socio-economic advancement to the palm oil industry expansion. The industry is reported to [employ around 650,000 people](#).

Thirdly, banning oil may mean that something else, a different vegetable oil, will simply take its place. As palm oil is a very efficient crop switching to an alternative will not solve the problem and may make things worse. Palm oil produces fruit all year round, can grow in relatively poor-quality soil, it consumes less land, needs less fertilizer and has lower production costs compared to other vegetable oils.

A solution considered in reducing the harmful effects of palm oil is making its production more sustainable. In 2004 the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was set up with the aim to 'make sustainable palm oil the norm' and, within 10 years, most of the major users of palm oil were signed up to the RSPO. However, The International Union for the [Conservation](#) of Nature (IUCN) found that ['sustainable' palm oil is not much better at preventing deforestation](#). This may be because the RSPO does not actually require members to use sustainable palm oil, rather they need to commit to eventually implementing more sustainable practices in the future. Greenpeace has also called RSPO's [definition of 'sustainable' questionable and labelled its certification as 'woefully substandard'](#). The IUCN report does suggest that certification bodies need to get much better, but that sustainable palm oil is the way forward if we want to reduce the harm caused by its production.

What can you do?

Whilst this may leave us feeling a bit powerless, there are still things we can do as individuals to reduce our negative impact on the environment in relation to palm oil.

- 1. Educate yourself on what you're consuming.** Take a look at the ingredient labels on products before buying them. Palm oil isn't always called palm oil on a label. The [Buycott app](#) allows consumers to scan labels to find out if the product contains palm oil, or [this website](#) lets you know what other keywords to look out for.
- 2. Choose palm oil free products.** If it's avoidable, avoid it. For example, if you're choosing between a jar of peanut butter with palm oil and one without, choose the one without! Same goes for toiletries. There are now so many palm-oil free alternatives out there!
- 3. If you can't avoid palm oil, choose a product that uses sustainable palm oil.** Look for a sustainable palm oil logo on the label, or this [WWF Palm Oil Buyers Scorecard](#) let's you know how committed companies are to sustainable options.
- 4. Consider your diet as a whole.** Beef production accounts for ten times more deforestation compared to palm oil. If you're really concerned about reducing your environmental impact from what you eat, opt for plant-based, low-processed food. [This](#)

[article](#) spells it out pretty clearly, or read more about this in another article written by Sustainability Champion Emanuela Nova, “Why it all starts With What We Eat”.

Additional resources

This article really only touches the surface of a complex industry and it’s complex consequences. If you’re interested in knowing more, these resources may be a helpful start.

[BBC World ‘The Foodchain’](#) podcast, ‘Can Palm Oil be Sustainable’: Hear from farmers on the challenges and benefits of sustainable palm oil production.

[For What It's Earth](#) podcast, ‘Palm Oil: What’s the Problem?’: More information about palm oil’s other uses, like in biofuel.

[Greenpeace website](#): For a general overview of the industry and its environmental issues.

[Futurelearn](#): A free online course on ‘Engaging with Controversies in the Food System’.

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This article is written by Bronwen Eastaugh, an Environmental Sustainability Champion. Bronwen is not an environmental expert but cares about the planet and is volunteering her time to support the University to improve its environmental performance and to encourage staff and students to make positive changes. You can find out more about the Environmental Sustainability Champion’s group [here](#).