

Cast Your Vote Today (& Every Day) For Rainforests, Orangutans & Personal Health

Rainforests and their inhabitants are under serious threat because of palm oil, a widely-used substance that also presents a danger to our own health. Learn all about it and what we can do.

Voting is a hot topic these days, but it's important to keep in mind that each and every one of us casts powerful votes on a daily basis. Every single day, regardless of the month or year, we decide what to buy, what to eat, what to wear, what to take from the environment and what to introduce back in, and no matter how deep our pockets, those decisions bear influence through the laws of supply and demand. Moreover, when we are united and cast our votes collectively, we become a commanding force capable of transforming the world into the kinder, healthier place we all seek.



That's why it's so important that we come together now in a collective stand against unsustainable palm oil—for the sake of orangutans (some of our closest relatives in the animal kingdom), for Sumatran rhinos and tigers and pygmy elephants who are on the cusp of extinction, for native villagers whose voices are silenced as their homes and livelihoods are mercilessly seized, and for future generations, both here and abroad, whose rights to clean air and a habitable earth are deteriorating by the minute.

You see, the problem with palm oil lies in how it is being produced—a process that is carelessly ravaging the world's rainforests, decimating habitat for critically endangered species, and contributing greatly to global warming—and those issues, along with the damage palm oil can cause to our own health, are why we all need to care.

Let's take a closer look at palm oil and how it relates to these issues.

First, what is palm oil?

Palm oil is the oil pressed from the *elaeis guineensis* tree, and because these trees are incredibly high yielding and the oil can be produced so cheaply, it is used in many of the products we consume on a daily basis—from piecrusts, cereals, chocolate, peanut butter and instant noodles to shampoos, toothpaste, cosmetics, soap and biofuel.

Where does it come from?

Oil palm trees are native to Africa but thrive anywhere that's hot and moist, including Indonesia and Malaysia (which are now the largest producers and exporters of palm oil in the world), as well as several areas in Latin America. These are the same places where much the world's precious rainforests reside.

As the "lungs" of our planet, these rainforests are invaluable to all life on Earth and produce much of the world's oxygen while absorbing vast amounts of carbon dioxide to rein in climate change. They are also home to more than half of all known animal, insect and plant species and house the ingredients that can cure many of the world's diseases.



Rainforests are diverse places, indeed, and a few oil palm trees scattered here and there surely wouldn't disturb their rich and treasured ecosystems. But man's greed has destroyed that balance. Skyrocketing demand for palm oil in packaged food and household products has made these trees a valuable commodity, and human enterprise has taken over. As a result, the world's rainforests are routinely clearcut, bulldozed and burned—to the tune of more than 80,000 acres per day and an area the size of 50+ football fields per hour—to make room for more and more oil palm plantations.



What is the environmental impact?

The expanse of tree loss—balanced compositions of strangling fig, pelawan, agarwood, menggaris, belian and tongkat ali trees in Indonesia and Malaysia now replaced by row after row of homogeneous oil palm—is a monumental disaster in and of itself, releasing mass amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, accelerating global warming, and effectively destroying the natural old growth we rely on to eradicate all that carbon and contamination. At times, the amount of greenhouse gas that is emitted through this destruction on a daily basis [exceeds that of the entire United States](#).

But a forest is much more than its trees. And the consequences of these activities hit far and wide. Surrounding vegetation and peat soils are similarly burned to a crisp, unleashing even more sequestered carbon, and with it, methane, smoke and other pollutants into the air. This smoke, and the haze and smog it creates, pervade not only the immediate area but also travel for thousands of miles, sully the air and triggering respiratory issues throughout. [Greenpeace estimates](#) that more than 110,000 people die prematurely each year as a result.



In addition, the remaining land turns dry as tinder, paving the way for more devastating fires, and pristine rivers transform into foul graveyards of debris.

How does it affect wildlife?

Rainforests support rich ecosystems of animal life that in Indonesia and Malaysia include orangutans, Sumatran tigers, Sumatran rhinos, pygmy elephants, proboscis monkeys, Malayan tapirs, sun bears, bearded pigs, otters, crocodiles, and myriad species of birds and fish, to name a few. Many of these are found nowhere else on Earth, and most are now endangered if not nearing extinction. Those not killed in the burning of the land find themselves homeless and forced to relocate closer to civilization where they're thoroughly unwelcome. Often, they are persecuted as pests by palm plantation workers and beaten or poisoned, sometimes with bounties offered on their heads. Others, particularly babies, are abducted for the illegal pet trade and thrust into abominable circumstances.



What about local communities?

In addition to being exposed to all the smoke and pollutants in the air, and the myriad pesticides and chemicals that are wontedly sprayed to maintain homogenization within the newly erected palm plantations, the livelihoods of local tribes, many of whom already live in poverty, are put at risk as the ecosystems on which they rely to grow their food and produce their trades are effectively demolished. Rarely are they warned or compensated before the land they count on is sold and spent, and the eviction of entire villages at gunpoint isn't uncommon. Standing up for oneself often results in violent conflicts, even murder, and those who opt to align with the plantation developers sustain a scarcely better fate. Sadly, labor abuses and human rights violations aren't well managed in these parts.

What about us?

Meanwhile, we who go about our lives on the other side of the globe are being affected, as well, and not just through the environmental impacts already discussed. Palm oil is now the most commonly used oil in the world, and it's terribly high in saturated fat—more so than most other oils, including canola, sesame, safflower, olive and avocado oils. It contributes to LDL cholesterol (often referred to as “bad” cholesterol) as much as trans fat, and is typically oxidized, which makes it even more unhealthy and puts the body at higher risk for developing cardiovascular disease when consumed.

All of this destruction, pain, and ill health... and for what?

Sadly, all of this is conducted for the sake of cheaper products, corporate profits, and more affordable grocery- and drugstore receipts. Yes, we ourselves are contributing to this mess every time we shop for packaged goods and household products that contain palm oil, and it's not always as simple as doing a label check before you buy because the inclusion of palm oil is often cleverly disguised.

While packaged ingredient lists that include words like *palm fruit oil*, *palm kernel*, *palmate*, *palmitate*, *palmolein*, *palmitoyl*, and *sodium palm kernlate* may be more easily identifiable to those who are keenly aware, the industry has also managed to mask palm oil under much more obscure labels such as *azelaic acid*, *butyl stearate*, *calcium lactylate*, *emulsifier 422*, *ceteth-20*, *SLS*, *myristate* or *cetyl*

ethylhexanoate—even more recognizable terms like *glycerin*, *vegetable oil* or *cocoa butter substitute*—and many, many others. (For a more comprehensive list, go to <http://www.theplasticdiaries.com/popular/palm-oil-free-beauty-for-world-orangutan-day>.)

So what can we do?

The best we can do for the rainforests, the environment and our own health is to choose products that are 100% oil free, or if they must contain oil, then those that consist of 100% olive oil, coconut oil, sesame oil, etc. (i.e., no palm oil, glycerin or “vegetable oil”). While these alternate oils do carry health consequences when consumed, they are far less impactful on the environment, rainforests and endangered wildlife.

The next best thing we can do is to buy from brands that use “sustainably sourced” palm oil, which is meant to infer that the palms from which the oil was sourced were not grown on cleared rainforest. Unfortunately, enforcement of such standards is extremely lax and such claims can only be guaranteed by investigating the supply chain back to the source, which is both challenging and time consuming, so very few brands actually do so. Moreover, any use of palm oil, whether that oil is sourced sustainably or otherwise, contributes to ongoing demand, and therefore more rainforest destruction, so opt for these products only as a backup solution.

Finally, see how your favorite brands rank in terms of their palm oil sourcing activities (here are the scorecards from [Rainforest Action Network \(RAN\)](#), [Union of Concern Scientists](#), [WWF](#) and [One Green Planet](#)), then reach out to any companies who aren’t sourcing responsibly to voice your concern and urge them to solve these issues in their supply chains by adopting and adhering to strict “no deforestation” policies.

Remember, our purchasing power is the most effective tool we have to end this destruction, protect endangered species, and preserve the essential lungs of the planet. If companies refuse to change, then we must be the change by making purchasing decisions that can halt this crisis and by supporting only those companies that make a real and serious effort to be deforestation-free.

Petitions to sign:

http://www.ran.org/snack_food_20

<https://secure3.convio.net/ucs/site/Advocacy?cmd=display&page=UserAction&id=5188>

<https://www.rainforest-rescue.org/petitions/914/orangutans-victims-of-sustainable-palm-oil>

<https://actions.sumofus.org/a/starbucks-palm-oil>

http://www.ran.org/tell_pepsico_to_take_the_conflict_palm_oil_challenge

https://secure3.convio.net/gpeace/site/Advocacy?cmd=display&page=UserAction&id=1885&s_src=actions

Thank you! Together, we can make a difference.

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Photos courtesy of [Wikipedia](#) and [Free Malaysia Today](#)