



ASIAN ELEPHANT S U P P O R T

Greetings from Asian Elephant Support!

It's been a while since we last wrote, and we are excited to introduce our Education initiative. One of our new board members, April Yoder, is an elephant handler and the Conservation committee chair for the [Elephant Managers Association](#), and she is now our Education committee chair. April's focus is on the palm oil crisis, and she wrote this article after one of her recent visits to Sumatra. This article is also posted on our website under [Education](#). Palm oil consumption has a far-reaching impact on the habitat of orangutans, elephants and other wildlife, and it is through education that we, as consumers, can make a difference.

One of the biggest problems threatening wildlife in SE Asia such as orangutans, elephants, tigers, and rhino, is the loss of tropical forests to palm oil plantations. What does this mean to those of us who do not live in the region, and what can we do about it?

As I started doing research for this article, the complexity and controversy surrounding the use of palm oil quickly became apparent. It is an immensely complex issue, so the intent of this article is to simply introduce some of the facts surrounding the palm oil crisis.



*Orangutan in forest of Borneo
(photo by Jay Ullal)*

The African palm oil tree (*Elaeis guineensis*) originated in West Africa and was introduced into Malaysia in 1910. Palm oil trees can only grow in tropical areas where heat and rainfall are abundant. Currently Malaysia and Indonesia are the two leading producers of palm oil and account for 83% of production and 89% of global exports. However, it is also grown in other

countries like Cameroon and Nigeria in Africa, Colombia in South America, and Papua New Guinea in SE Asia. Both palm oil and palm kernel oil are produced from the palm oil tree. Palm oil is derived from the pulp of the fruit, while palm kernel oil is derived from the seed of the fruit.

Because of growing concerns about trans-fatty acids, many producers started looking for alternatives to partially hydrogenated vegetable oils. An added incentive to seeking alternatives was the fact that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration required food labels to list the amount of trans- fat per serving by January 1, 2006. Palm oil is inexpensive, is a semi-solid at room temperature, and is good for frying because it can withstand high temperatures. Another advantage is that the yield for palm oil is 6 times greater than canola oil, and about 10 greater than soy oil. Palm oil is now found in almost 50% of all consumer goods including cake mixes, ready- made foods, margarine, peanut butter, and cookies. The palm kernel oil is similar to cocoa oil and is used as a substitute for that fat in many chocolate products. It is also an important ingredient in animal feeds. Both types of palm oil are found in numerous non-food items such as detergents, cosmetics, greases, production of PVC, and printing inks. Ironically, palm oil is also used to make bio-fuels.

The demand for palm oil in the United States has tripled in the last five years, making the US the second largest importer. The production of palm oil has many devastating effects on the eco-rich rainforests of Malaysia and Indonesia. The rate of deforestation is staggering. Even though there is currently over 7 million acres of land in Borneo and Sumatra that has already been cleared, 4.9 million acres of rainforest are destroyed every year to make room for more palm oil plantations. By using the undisturbed rainforest, the corporations gain the added income from the timber.

With this rate of deforestation comes intense pressure on many species of plants and animals. There are thousands of unique species of plants and animals on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra. Many of these animals are critically endangered like the Borneo and Sumatran orangutans, the Borneo and Sumatran elephant, Sumatran tiger, and the Sumatran rhinoceros. Many animals, including elephants, are killed during the fires used to clear the land.



*Palm oil nursery in Sumatra
(photo courtesy of Elephant Managers Association)*



*Forest cleared for palm in West Kalimantan
(photo published in The Jakarta Globe)*

Burning is still a wide spread practice even though Indonesia made it illegal after massive plantation-initiated wildfires in 1997-1998 caused a haze that posed a health risk and even grounded flights in the region. In 1997 the Borneo orangutan population was decreased by one third. In that year alone, nearly 8,000 orangutans were killed by fires or by humans while they tried to escape the fires. The animals that are not killed by the fires are often involved in human/wildlife conflict.



*Sick orangutan rescued from palm plantation
(photo from Wildlife Extra)*

As of 2000, it is estimated there were only about 2,800 elephants in Sumatra, 800 in mainland Malaysia, and 1,000 in Borneo. Wildlife is also impacted by forest fragmentation that eliminates travel corridors and hinders migration routes.



*Palm planted up to forest edge with no buffer area
(photo courtesy of Elephant Managers Association)*

Indigenous people are also affected by the production of palm oil. The land for new palm oil plantations is often taken by force, causing violent conflicts. When these people are displaced they often move into new forested areas and clear more land for subsistence farming. While the income of a few plantation smallholders is increased, many of the villagers become poorly paid laborers. This income gap also causes social conflict within communities.

There are also environmental impacts associated with the plantations. Often palm oil-mill effluent is dumped directly into the water sources, making them unusable for drinking, bathing and fishing. The soil and water are polluted with pesticides and the fires used to clear the land pollute the air.



*Sumatra palm oil mill
(photo courtesy of International Elephant Foundation)*

As a result of increased pressure for sustainable palm oil, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was formed in 2004 and includes stakeholders such as WWF international, Malaysian Palm Oil Association, Migros (Switzerland's largest supermarket chain), and Unilever (a transnational corporation). The goal of the RSPO is to promote the growth and use of sustainable oil palm products through credible global standards and engagement of stakeholders. This not-for-profit organization has established Principles & Criteria (P&C) for certification of mills and plantations, formed Working Groups on Green House Gases, a Smallholder Task Force and a Biodiversity Technical Committee.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The production of palm oil is one of the major issues facing wildlife in Malaysia and Indonesia today. However, with the ever increasing demand for palm oil it is highly unlikely that production will stop. What can we do to at least slow the rate of production and the destruction of the forests? Become an educated consumer by reading labels to determine what products contain palm oil. Write letters to companies that use palm oil and encourage them to use certified sustainable palm oil or avoid using it altogether. Being aware of the issues is the first step to preserving the habitat that supports so many unique species.

Source for this article include:

Cheyenne Mountain Zoo - www.cmzoo.org/conservation/palmOilCrisis/

Woodland Park Zoo - www.zoo.org/Page.aspx?pid=1166

Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil - www.rspo.org

Rainforest Action Network - www.ran.org

Wikipedia - www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roundtable_on_Sustainable_Palm_Oil

Cruel Oil - www.cspinet.org/new/pdf/palm_oil_final_5-27-05.pdf

Thank you for your Support!

Please visit our website (www.asianelephantsupport.org) and follow us on [Facebook](#) (Asian Elephant Support). If you have questions or concerns, please [contact us](#).

We appreciate your support. Please consider a [donation](#) to help Asian elephants and those who care for them.

ASIAN ELEPHANT SUPPORT

www.asianelephantsupport.org

4764 Brookton Way, St. Louis, MO 63128 USA

Asian Elephant Support is a U.S. 501(c)(3) organization; donations are tax-deductible.