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The question of the effect of palm oil plantations in rainforest areas

MODEL UNITED NATIONS
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Introduction

Cosmetics, toothpaste, cereals, peanut butter, soap, bread, coffee creamers: all these products have one thing in common. Palm oil has been used in their production. The oil has been known to come with health benefits and other positive aspects, but recently it has become known to the general public the many downsides to it.

The production of palm oil comes with grave consequences for nature and wildlife, as large parts of forest are cut to make room for the plantations. As a result, animals are forced to live in smaller and smaller areas, endangering species like tigers, rhinos and elephants. Other repercussions can be seen in air and soil pollution.

85% of global palm oil export comes from Indonesia and Malaysia. In both countries it is a large part of the economy and export, and around 11 million smallholders and laborers are (indirectly) dependent on the industry.

On the other side of the map, the European Union is passing regulations complicating the market of palm oil created with deforestation.

Rainforests are impacted greatly by palm oil plantations. Parts are burned on a large scale to create room for the plantations. Indigenous people and near-extinct animal species are both driven away; human rights are violated almost everywhere. Over 700 conflicts in Indonesia have been caused by the palm oil industry. Furthermore, mass deforestation also emits an extensive amount of

greenhouse gasses, and in 2015, Indonesia briefly surpassed the USA, emitting the largest number of greenhouse gasses, despite being five times as small as the USA.

Additionally, the impacts on our health may also be worse than expected, being full of harmful fats.

This research report will elaborate on the question of palm oil and the consequences it has on rainforests all around the world. Hopefully, it will facilitate delegates' preparations and inform them properly about the issue.

Definition of Key Terms

Palm oil

A vegetable oil from the fruit of oil palm trees. It can come from either the fruit or the kernel, a stone inside the fruit, creating either crude or kernel oil. Kernel oil has more than 85% saturated fat, which is much worse for your health than the crude palm oil with its 50%.

This image shows the fruit where palm oil comes from.

Plantation

An area where cash crops are grown at a large scale monoculturally, typically in more tropical areas. There are many other kinds of plantations, but when this term is used in this report, it will be referencing this definition.

Rainforest

A luxuriant, dense forest, rich in biodiversity, with consistently heavy rainfall (generally 180-450 cm a year). Typically found in tropical areas.

Pollution

The presence or introduction into the environment of a substance which has harmful or poisonous effects. It can be found in many areas, for example the soil, ocean and air.

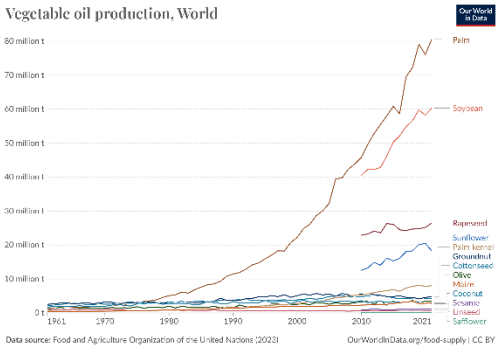
General Overview

History

In the 1800s, archeologists were examining a tomb at Abydos, when they stumbled upon a strange discovery. After research was conducted, they concluded this was palm oil, from 3000 BC. They believed, because of the large quantity, it was used for a dietary purpose. The oil was also believed to have ended up in Egypt through Arab traders.

Additionally, there are many written records of the use of palm oil in culinary by European travelers to and from West-Africa in the 15th century and onwards. In West Africa, the oil is used extensively in traditional cooking, and for a while it was also an important export product. During the period of slave trading, the product became known to slave traders, who used it as food during travels and learned of its many uses. After the abolition of slave trade, the market expanded to Europeans. After the British Industrial Revolution, a demand grew for the oil. It was needed for candles and machinery. First, West African farmers were the main suppliers of the product, but then

Europeans started to grow plantations in Central Africa and South-East Asia. In 1930 the production and trade had grown to 250 000 metric tons, but this would go on to grow to tens of millions.



In the graph you can see the development in different kinds of vegetable oil production. Palm oil is by far the most produced.

After the Second World War, technology related to the transport and production of palm oil developed greatly, significantly expanding the market. Malaysia rose up as the largest producer in the 1960s and held the title until Indonesia took it in the early 21st century.

Causes

The trading started in the 1800s as a replacement for the slave industry, something encouraged by the British empire. The oil is incredibly cheap and its uses versatile, which is why it still popular today. It is the most used vegetable oil in the world; in an average UK supermarket half the products will contain palm oil.

Originally, palm oil was mainly planted because it would easily grow. Up until today, it is an important ingredient in African cuisine, but its uses have expanded to many areas. It is, for example, commonly used in soaps.

Despite the downsides to the oil, it has many advantages, too. The plantations are far smaller, yet produce more oil than other vegetable oil farms.

Status quo

Although a number of companies producing palm oil have put in place policies that reduce their negative impact on deforestation and promote local communities rights, the industry still faces huge challenges to sustainability. large tracts of tropical forests are turned into monoculture plantations, often at the cost of the habitats of endangered species along with many greenhouse gas emissions due to burning. Many of the conflicts are due to land tenure, labour violations or environmental destruction are continuing to increase. States such as Indonesia which has been expanding at a rapid pace, enabling land grabbing and exploitation. stricter regulation along with better management practices are needed to transform the status quo of an industry producing an oil used in many consumer products, but at a heavy environmental and social cost. It has taken a step in the right direction, but the so-called journey to sustainability is far from complete for the palm oil industry.

Future problems

A study conducted in 2023, reported that the overall area of oil palm plantation covered around an aggregate of 15 million hectares. To put this into scale, it is just a little less than the size of Syria. Moreover, as of 1989, 45% of all plantations of palm oil trees in the region of Southeast Asia were grown on land that was previously forested. This is largely due to incessant demand for palm oil, since the crop requires sweeping acres of land. This most often comes at the expense of carbon-rich tropical forests and essential habitats. Such destruction endangers species like rhinos and elephants, and also puts remaining forests at more risk of deforestation, particularly with oil palm plantations expanding into previously untouched areas in West Africa and Latin America.

The methods of land clearing also multiply the environmental impact in producing palm oil. One of the common methods of land clearing is slash-and-burn in agriculture. Slash-and-burn agriculture is a method of cutting and burning vegetation to clear land meant for fields, called swiddens. The method has been criticized for releasing a large amount of greenhouse gasses, hence being the cause

of change in local and global climates. For instance, peatland conversion for the development of palm oil results in an estimated 438 million tonnes of CO2 emitted each year, which amounts to the total annual road emissions of the European Union. That such a huge volume of demand for palm oil is forecast to increase from the current 76 million metric tonnes to between 264 and 447 million by the year 2050 is an environmental challenge that needs to be urgently worked on. Palm oil production, unless effectively regulated and based on sustainability measures, would still promote deforestation, habitat loss, and climate change and pose a danger to biodiversity and the subsistence of human communities in those ecosystems.

Major Parties Involved

Malaysia

The tropical climate in Malaysia is ideal for the production of palm oil, and it started the process early in 1917 under European guidance. After the Second World War, the country had monopolized the British market, and Malaysia's new government was highly supportive of the industry. It quickly grew to form an essential part of the economy, which it still is to this day. Malaysia is currently the second-largest producer for palm oil and plays an irreplaceable role on the international stage.

Indonesia

Indonesia, much like Malaysia, has the perfect circumstances to produce palm oil. In 1907, the first plantations were started, and grew exponentially over the following decades. Indonesia's economy, too, is made up for a large part of palm oil and its export. In 2007, the country surpassed Malaysia, but not without consequences. The industry has had environmental consequences on the nation, due to the increase in climate change. Furthermore, nature has been destroyed faster than in other nations like Brazil.

The United Kingdom

The UK is making an effort to only use sustainable palm oil, but this goal is far from being reached. In a historic aspect, the country has been quite involved in the palm oil industry as well. Being one of the first European users in the 18th and 19th century, it played a significant role in the rise of the product. Despite not having any plantations located in the nation, the kingdom has played a significant part in the rise of plantations in other regions.

Timeline of Key Events

Below will be described the history behind palm oil briefly.

Date	Description of event
Early 1800s	Trading in palm oil starts to expand internationally; West-African nations supply the product to Europeans.
Late 1800s/Early 1900s	European plantations are founded in other regions; the market grows extensively.
Mid 1900s	Development in technology makes it possible for the trade and production of palm oil to reach new extremes; the product is used in the fabrication of many different things.
1960s	Malaysia becomes the largest exporter of palm oil; a few years later Malaysian and Indonesian

	production of palm oil surpassed the total produced in Africa.
2000s	Indonesia takes Malaysia's place as the largest producer of palm oil, followed later by taking the USA's title as largest emitor of greenhouse gases.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The United Nations are involved with this issue in several different ways. The Sustainable Development Goals are a step in the right direction, encouraging sustainability and climate action, as well as the multiple environmental panels in action. Rather than the large, monopoly-like economy you see now, the UN encourages smallholdings as a way to reach sustainability. There are no specific resolutions yet, but several reports have been published on the topic.

- Memorandum of Understanding directed at raising global awareness and generating market demand for sustainable palm oil, 2014, UNEP

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Various efforts have been made to make palm oil production more environmentally friendly. However, many academics and NGOs point out that government laxity in regulation has allowed some companies to cynically manipulate and understate impacts on habitats outside their concession areas. In some cases, greenwashing by local governments plays down the extent of harm caused by companies.

Despite all this, many regulations have been passed to reduce the impact of palm oil plantations. For example, a policy by the EU is in place to ensure that no agricultural products

from illegal and deforestation-related sources enter the EU market (EU Deforestation-Free Regulation (EUDR)). This went into effect in 2020, whereby goods purchased in the EU should not cause deforestation or forest destruction anywhere globally.

Other efforts include the certification schemes in the fight against illegal palm oil plantations. One of these has been a roundtable on sustainable palm oil (RSPO) whereby companies are required to get certification to produce palm oil. This licensing is valid for five years before its renewal; thus, companies must abide by the sustainable practices put in place. This system will assist the EU and other countries in choosing the right companies for trade and promote responsible sourcing of palm oil.

RSPO, takes active steps towards achieving sustainability in their palm oil production and covers around one-fifth of the globally traded palm oil. While these schemes establish high standards that forbid deforestation and guarantee respect for human rights, their effectiveness has increasingly been questioned by numerous complaints and concerns about weak compliance, greenwashing incidents, and very low participation from smallholders, for whom certification is too bureaucratic and costly. Indeed, studies have shown that sometimes there is hardly any difference at all between the environmental impacts of certified and non-certified plantations, something that questions the integrity of the very certification process. Such initiatives must be accompanied by regulatory frameworks with real teeth, such as the EU Deforestation-Free Regulation, to at least ensure that companies have an obligation to guarantee that their imports do not support deforestation and, therefore, are responsible for how palm oil is sourced and accounted for across the industry.

Possible Solutions

Often, it is suggested that palm oil should be boycotted. Individuals have suggested this is the only effective solution, but the consequences will likely be counterproductive. A possible boycott will not necessarily have good consequences for the rainforest, as different oils will be used as replacement. Instead, it is important that companies are transparent about their production, so sustainable palm oil production might grow. Additionally, due to the large part palm oil plays in our economy, the millions of people working in the industry will also likely lose their job and ability to provide. Furthermore, oil is a necessity, and the production will likely turn to a different source. However, this is not desirable, as palm oil is by far the most efficient vegetable oil. It produces about nine times more oil per surface area than other types of oil, so 'switching' will only increase deforestation.

Other aspects that could be focused on are educational. Many people are not aware of the consequences of palm oil, and use the substance in a careless matter. Explaining the consequences might convince them to look more carefully. Also, increasing the price with taxes on a global level might decrease the use of the product, though the result might be similar to that of a boycott.

In other words, it is important that a sustainable way of producing palm oil is found. In this process, a focus should be on halting deforestation. Protecting and restoring the forests should be a priority, alongside the creation of a fair situation for the workers.

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