

# Sustainable Palm Oil from a conservationist's perspective

A talk by Cat Barton, Chester Zoo's Field Conservation Manager, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2017

## What is palm oil?

Palm oil comes from the fruit of the palm oil plant native to W Africa.



Cutting down the fruit bunches



Palm oil fruits

It is the world's most widely used vegetable oil – it's in 50% of the products sold in UK supermarkets. Global production of palm oil has doubled over the last decade. Worldwide demand expected to double again by 2050.

## Where is it grown?

85% of palm oil is grown on plantations in SE Asia, mainly Borneo and Sumatra. But the palm oil industry is growing and spreading to the Philippines, Nigeria and S America.

## What are the advantages of palm oil?

It is very high yielding as compared with soya or rapeseed oil; it uses less land so could be considered more environmentally friendly and it also needs fewer pesticides and fertilisers. Palm oil production continues to grow because it is the most versatile of all the vegetable oils, the reason being that palm kernel oil can be processed to form a wide range of products. It also has huge economic value - it creates a huge number of jobs, generates income for everyone from small farmers to massive global industries and makes a big contribution to many local and national economies. 4.5 million people in Malaysia and Indonesia earn a living from palm oil production. Palm oil accounts for 11% of Indonesia's export earnings with one third of this attributed to smallholder farmers.

**It means that some countries have been lifted out of poverty.**

**But there is a major problem - when the forest is cleared for the palm oil plantations a huge amount of biodiversity is lost.**

The plantations are often grown right up to the river leaving patches of habitat in a sea of plantations. Species such as the orang-utans can get trapped in the forests and need to be rescued. Deforestation and fragmentation has led to the widespread loss of irreplaceable and biodiverse rich forests. Other problems include increased risk of flooding, peat depletion, pollution because the pesticides are not carefully managed, increased risk of fires as forest is cleared and human/wildlife conflict. The dependence on palm oil production can also cause community/social problems such as land grabbing, poor wages and facilities, decreasing food security, elimination of other livelihoods and child labour. In addition, deforestation is having a major impact on climate change. Rainforests are "carbon sinks" storing huge amounts of carbon. When rainforests are cleared, this carbon is released into the atmosphere thus having a massive impact on the environment and increasing global warming. Countries such as Indonesia are high up on the list of greenhouse gas emitting countries, not because of the industries but because of the clearing of forests. Indonesia is the third highest emitter of greenhouse gases.

## So, what is the solution?

A boycott of palm oil is not the answer – that would only transfer the problem to a less productive oil which needs more land to grow the same amount. The solution is to ensure the industry acts responsibly by promoting sustainable palm oil production.

There is an organisation known as RSPO, (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) made up of members from industry (palm oil growers), manufacturers (Cadbury's), retailers (Sainsbury's) and environmental charities (such as Greenpeace) which aims to set a standard for sustainable plantations.

## What is a sustainable plantation?

- Protects areas of high conservation value
- Connects areas to provide wildlife corridors
- Communicates with local people and gains free, prior and informed consent before new planting. No land grabs
- No deforestation of primary rainforests
- Use existing plantations more efficiently and effectively

## What is the present situation in the UK?

In 2009 UK committed to increasing the numbers of certified sustainable palm oil producers – figures show an increase from 55,000 in 2009 to 326,033 in 2015. The British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA) also signed the commitment and are represented on the Roundtable

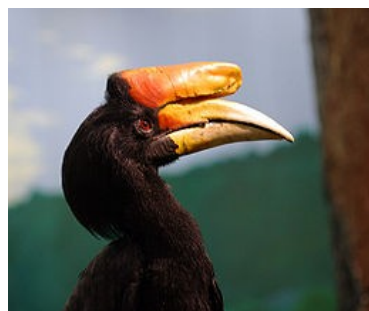
A European Parliament's Committee report has called for EU wide commitment to sourcing 100% certified sustainable palm oil by 2020 and for all EU members to sign the "Amsterdam Declaration". UK has signed.

## Chester Zoo's Conservation Programme

The commitment to sustainable palm oil production is part of the the zoo's conservation programme. There are 6 field programmes round the world. One of these focuses on the Sabah area of Malaysian Borneo and is known as the Kinabatangan Orangutan Conservation Programme. Palm oil here is a major source of income – 19% of the land mass is planted with 80% of natural forests being lost. There are approx 11,000 orangutans in Sabah and 1,000 of these live within the Kinabatangan river landscape. Current research is focussed on the orang-utans use of palm oil plantations – a camera trap study has been set up at the edge of the sanctuary. The Zoo's "Go Orange" project has funded this. In addition to research the programme supports the building of bridges for the orang-utans and nests for the hornbill.



Orang-utans



Hornbill

## The Sustainable Palm Oil Challenge

Chester Zoo was inspired by their conservation partners to put palm oil production at the centre of their conservation campaign activities because the issue is directly impacting on the species that they work with in Borneo and Sumatra. The Zoo has made other zoos across UK and Europe aware of the global environmental problem of palm oil production and asked them to support the challenge.

At home, the Zoo is busy promoting the "Sustainable Palm Oil Challenge" by

- Internal procurement – providing goods in the shop and cafe which contain palm oil from sustainable sources. Questionnaire sent out to suppliers.
- A shopping list of products containing palm oil from sustainable sources - see Zoo's website and find "Act for Wildlife". There's also an app for phones – "Palm Smart".
- Restaurant project – the Zoo surveyed restaurants in the North West and found that knowledge of palm oil production was low. So information has now been provided to restaurants and the Zoo has also produced a Restaurant Partner Toolkit which contains a questionnaire and audit tools. The first "Restaurant Partner" signed up this summer to become 100% sustainable and the Zoo is working with a further 60 restaurants. Once they can prove their sustainable credentials, the Zoo will launch a sustainable palm oil restaurant guide.
- The Green Gold Conspiracy – a theatrical adventure game which shines a light on issues relating to palm oil production. It will be premiered at Manchester Science Festival's "After Dark" programme. There could be an online version in the future.
- Training zoo volunteers on the issues relating to sustainable palm oil production and encouraging interaction with the visitors. Information available in the ape house.
- Engagement with schools and "Go Orange for Orang-utans" project – 200 schools have now signed up. Part of the project is encouraging youngsters to check labelling on packages and asking the schools whether school meals are using sustainable palm oil.

Although the programme started off as a concern for orang-utans and their conservation, it has now moved to the much wider issue of deforestation which is having a major impact on climate.

Chester Zoo is at the forefront of raising the issues around palm oil production not only with industries and government but also with the general public. The Zoo aims to get Chester as the first Sustainable Palm Oil city!

*Terry Green thanked Cat for her most informative and interesting talk and we hope that CWDF members will actively support this very important challenge*