

Palm oil – The invisible threat

How our consumption of palm oil is responsible for tropical rainforests being cut down

Palm oil is obtained from the fruit of the oil palm. It is flavourless, solid at room temperature, and liquid at body temperature. And it's the world's most widely used vegetable oil. Half the products in our supermarkets contain palm oil¹. It's also a component in biodiesel, as well as being used in the chemical and pharmaceutical industries. But few people know that, when we buy these products, we increase the threat to tropical forests and their native animals, such as Birds of Paradise, Sumatran Tigers, and species such as the Orangutan. The last two of these are now rated as facing extinction.

Demand for palm oil has been growing continuously. This has led to the area used globally to grow oil palms experiencing a fourfold increase over the past 30 years. The total area has now reached 18.7 million hectares,² an area about half the size of Germany. Indonesia is the country with the most oil palm plantations: In 2014 33 million tonnes of oil were produced from 7.4 million hectares.³ Malaysia was in second place with 19.8 million tonnes. This means that 86 percent of the world's palm oil comes from these two countries.⁴ With other important palm oil producing countries situated in Africa and Latin America.

Huge areas of tropical rainforest are cut down to make way for new oil palm plantations. In 2007, satellite pictures were used to map the areas of Borneo which had been deforested. In 2015, around 90 percent of these areas were being used as plantations for palm oil and cellulose.⁵ Palm oil production is now reckoned to be the main driver of tropical rainforest destruction in Asia.

When rainforest is cut down, species diversity is reduced. Not only orang-utans lose their habitat. Many other animals and plants do too. Only 23 percent of the vertebrates and 31 percent of the non-vertebrates living in rainforest can be found in oil palm plantations.⁶ The same applies to plants: only a few tropical forest species grow in oil palm monocultures.



The total area of land taken up by oil palm plantations around the world would cover half of Germany.⁷



Oil palm plantations in the middle of Guatemalan rainforest.



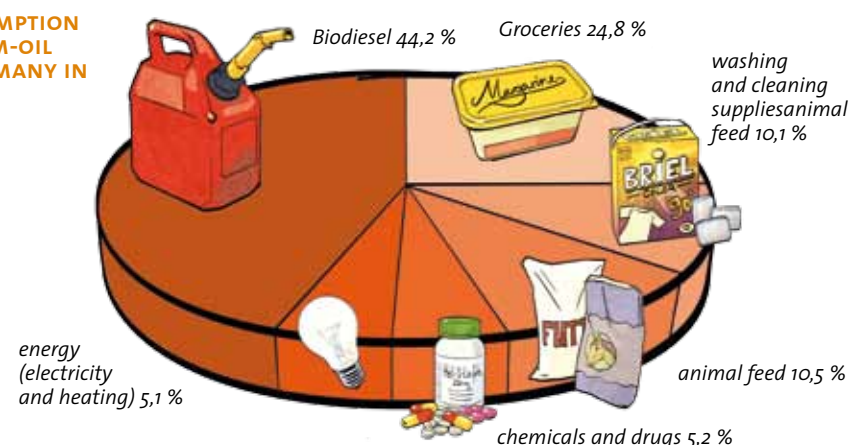
Palm oil is obtained from the flesh and the seed of the palm fruit and is very versatile.

Rainforest in the tank and on the table

About 60 percent of the palm oil imported into the EU is used in the food and chemical industries.⁸ The rest of it is used up as biodiesel or in power plants to generate energy.

In 2013 nearly 1.5 million tonnes of palm oil made up about 20 percent of the total amount of vegetable oil consumed in Germany.⁹ Each of us uses an average of 19 kilogram of palm oil every year.¹⁰ The food industry uses about a quarter of the total, mainly in ready meals, margarine, spreads, baking products, and confectionery.¹¹

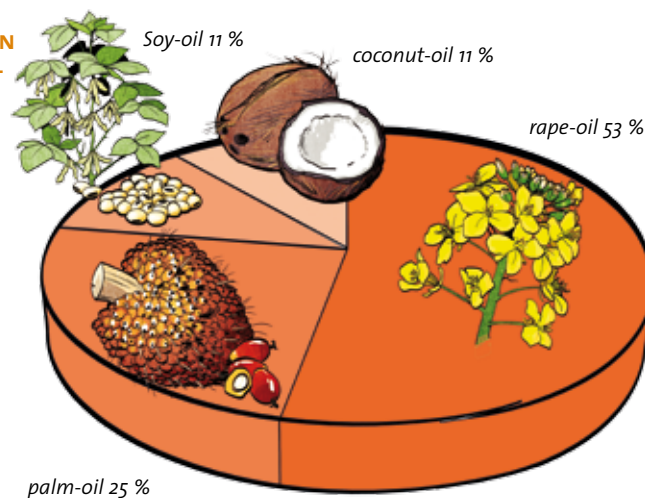
CONSUMPTION OF PALM-OIL IN GERMANY IN 2013



In Germany about half the palm oil is used as a source of energy, about 90 percent of this amount is used in our biodiesel. The EU's 2009 Renewable Energy Directive¹² decreed that there be a certain proportion of biofuel in petrol and diesel. As a result the proportion of palm oil in European biodiesel has risen from 8 percent in 2006 to 20-25 percent today.¹³ Meaning there's a piece of rainforest in every litre of diesel we put into the tank.

Germany uses an amount of palm-oil equal to 1760 swimming pools per year. In 2013 almost half of it was used as an energy source.

COMPOSITION OF BIODIESEL IN THE EU



Biodiesel in Germany contains 25 percent palm-oil from the tropical rainforests.

It doesn't add up!

If you don't look ahead, it's easy to make a mistake

It wasn't such a bad idea to begin with: Burning oil and other fossil fuels is harmful to the Earth's climate, and supplies will eventually run out. Biofuels, on the other hand, grow back eventually. However, does this mean that they're sustainable? If you take a closer look, it becomes clear that the calculation doesn't add up where palm oil is involved – on the contrary.

The production of palm oil harms the climate in three ways

A palm oil plantation doesn't sequester even half as much carbon as would be stored in the same area of tropical rainforest.¹⁶ When rainforest is cut down – or, even worse, burnt – to make way for a palm oil plantation, large amounts of CO₂ are released into the atmosphere. Because of the clearing of rainforest especially on peat soils, Indonesia is in third place on the list of countries which do most damage to the climate – right behind the USA and China.¹⁷

Even more CO₂ is released when peat soils in Southeast Asia are drained for agricultural use. Peatlands are by far the most efficient carbon stores – they cover only three per cent of the Earth's land surface, but store twice as much carbon as all of the world's forests put together.¹⁸ When the groundwater level is lowered so that land can be used for agriculture, oxygen gets to the carbon stored in the peat and large quantities of CO₂ are released into our atmosphere.

In addition to this, emissions of greenhouse gases occur at every step of the palm oil production process: from the production of fertilizer to transport and the processing of the fruit in oil mills. The emissions are far from negligible: To produce one ton of raw palm oil, as much CO₂ is emitted as would be the result of burning 370 litres of mineral oil.¹⁹

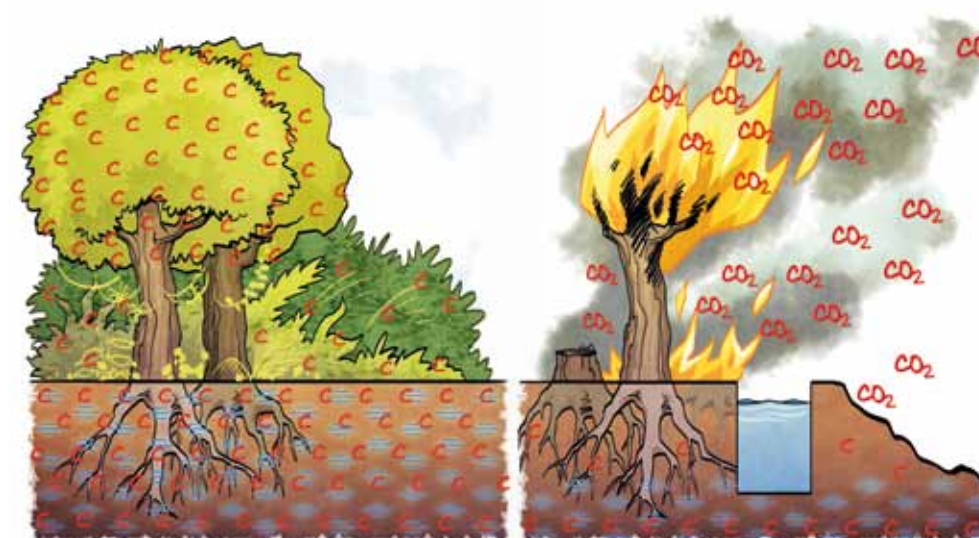
To sum it up the climate balance sheet of palm oil reaches far into the red.



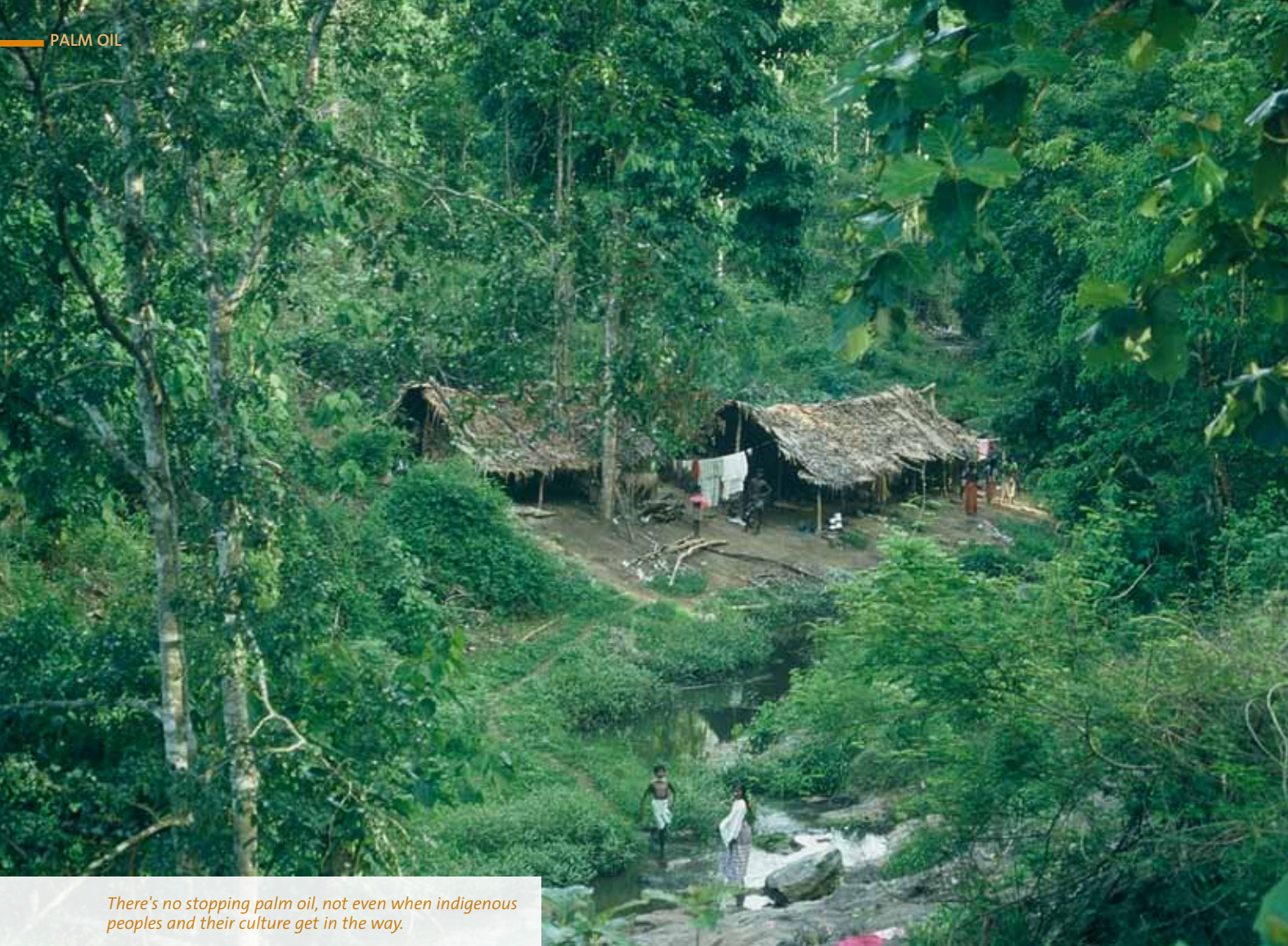
To create plantations species-rich rainforest is cut-down.



Animals like the orang-utan lose their natural habitat.



Slash-and-burn makes way for new plantations in Indonesia. On top of that, there is the drying out of the peat soils lying underneath the rainforest. Both of these practices result in carbon being set free from biomass and releasing the harmful CO₂ into the atmosphere.



There's no stopping palm oil, not even when indigenous peoples and their culture get in the way.



Slash and burn is used to make way for new plantations.



Seasonal work on plantations.

What do local people say?

As with most things, opinions vary. Local inhabitants, especially indigenous people, tend to – sometimes right from the start – see the creation of oil palm plantations as a threat to their culture and livelihood. On the other hand, some people have high hopes for a secure income and a better quality of life. But these hopes are rarely fulfilled.

Indonesia exemplifies the social problems caused by palm oil production. In many cases, land was made available by the state before the ownership and usage rights had been clarified. The traditional customary law of the largely indigenous local population is not recognised by the state. This means that commonly conflict will ensue and the rural inhabitants are frequently driven out.²⁰

The job creation argument also turns out to be weak when examined more closely. Many of the new jobs are seasonal and low-paid, so that families don't have a secure income throughout the year. In addition, the working conditions are often dangerous: heavy physical labour, coupled with high use of pesticides without adequate protective clothing, causes illness and injuries. The health of millions of people is also endangered by huge forest fires, which are caused by slash-and-burn and drainage of the peat to make way for oil palm plantations.

Be part of the solution!

We can all help to reduce the destruction of rainforest by oil palm plantations by informing ourselves and changing our consumption. This isn't difficult where food is concerned: There's an EU regulation which stipulates that the plant the oil is produced of, must be listed on packaging. Unfortunately this does not yet apply to washing powder, cleaning products, or cosmetics.

And equally important: Other vegetable oils are often not a good substitute, because their environmental and climate impact is likely to be even worse. This means producing the same amount of oil requires even more space and leads to similar problems.

What can we do?

Whether it be palm oil or a different kind of plant oil – it is advisable to stay away from unnecessary use of oil in groceries. The best way to do this is by preparing fresh meals instead of buying ready or fast food.

Become active self by changing your consumption

● Use your bike instead.

In Germany, the highest proportion of palm oil is used in biodiesel for road vehicles. Give your car a rest more often and use a bicycle or public transport instead. It's good for your health and helps out the rainforest.

● Take the initiative in developing alternative transport plans!

Join a local citizens' initiative to promote alternative transport.

● Don't buy ready meals! They are especially likely to contain palm oil.

Prepare meals from fresh ingredients whenever possible. They taste better! Pay attention to the quality of the ingredients you use. Choose organic whenever you can.

● Look out for the organic label!

If you choose to use products containing palm oil, check that they carry the EU organic label with the added guarantee "aus kontrolliert biologischem Anbau" ("from organic farms subject to monitoring") on the packaging.

● Make it clear that you prefer the environmentally friendly alternative.

If a product contains palm oil, ask in your supermarket (or, alternatively, contact the producer) which criteria the palm oil complies with. Make it clear that you would prefer an environmentally friendly alternative.

● Take politicians to task.

Ask politicians who hold positions of responsibility in your locality where they stand on the subject of palm oil.

"Sustainable" is not necessarily organic

In the EU, Biofuels have to be produced sustainably. Otherwise they are not eligible for state support, nor may they be counted towards national renewable energy targets. This, coupled with worldwide pressure from aware consumers, is resulting in increased demand for palm oil, which is certified as sustainable. There is now a variety of international certification systems. The largest is the Round Table for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), which was founded by a WWF initiative. In the RSPO, actors from every link in the palm oil supply chain, together with non-governmental organisations, want to push forward and promote the sustainable production of palm oil by setting minimum standards.

OroVerde welcomes certification of sustainability in principle. However, we do not currently endorse the RSPO

label, because RSPO certified palm oil cannot be equated with ecological cultivation. It is likely to be cultivated under conditions that compromise soil quality as well as biodiversity and do not unconditionally exclude deforestation.

Currently only 0.02 percent of the total amount of land used to produce palm oil globally is used to produce according to organic standards.²¹ In 2013, between 6,000 and 8,000 tonnes of organic palm oil were imported into Germany.²² Individual flagship projects for the organic certification of palm oil supplies are operating in Ghana and Ecuador, where small cooperative farmers are cultivating oil palms. In Germany, GEPA and the organic food producer Rapunzel make use of this oil.²³

For further information

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Authors: Birthe Hesebeck, Sarah Wylegalla, Bernd Pieper

Project team background information: Dr. Elke Mannigel, Sarah Meretz, Martin Baumann

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Fon 0228 24280 0, Fax 0228 24290 55, info@oroverde.de, www.regenwald-schuetzen.org

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