

Palm oil: Is it really that bad?

Reading comprehension

What is palm oil and where does it come from?

Palm oil is a type of vegetable oil, like sunflower or rapeseed oil. It comes from the fruit of African oil palm trees (scientific name 'Elaeis guineensis'). Two types of oil can be produced from the trees; crude palm oil comes from squeezing the fruit, and palm kernel oil comes from crushing the stone in the middle of the fruit.

Where does it grow?

Oil palm trees are native to Africa, but were introduced to Southeast Asia as an ornamental tree crop in the 19th century. They grow naturally in tropical rainforest areas, but they are being planted and farmed specifically to produce palm oil for the ever-increasing global demand for this product. Indonesia and Malaysia in Southeast Asia make up over 85% of the global supply of palm oil.



African oil palm trees

What products contain palm oil?

Palm oil is in nearly everything we buy on the high street – it is in roughly 50% of the packaged products we find in supermarkets. It can be found in food products like ice cream, pizza and chocolate. Not only is it in food, but it is also in household products like washing detergent, deodorant, shampoo and toothpaste.

Why is palm oil everywhere?

Palm oil has many different properties, which makes it versatile for use. It is semi-solid at room temperature, so it is used in food like margarine to keep it spreadable. It can also give products a longer shelf-life. It's able to give products a crispy and crunchy texture because the oil is stable at high temperatures. One huge advantage to using palm oil over other oils is that it is colourless and odourless, so doesn't affect the look or smell of the food it is used in. As well as being used in foods, palm oil is also used as a cooking oil in Asia and Africa.

What is the issue with palm oil?

Farmers in Southeast Asia have been cutting and burning down the rainforest in order to plant African oil palm trees; this deforestation (of some of the world's most bio-diverse forests) has had detrimental consequences on the global environment. Firstly, the fires and farms destroy the natural habitat of plants and wildlife, most worryingly of endangered species like the orangutan. Secondly, by losing large parts of the forest, millions of tonnes of greenhouse gases are being released into the atmosphere and contributing to climate change. It is reported that palm oil production was responsible for about 8% of the world's deforestation between 1990 and 2008. On top of the environmental concerns, there are also worrying concerns about the use of child labour on the palm oil farms in Indonesia.



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Why is palm oil seen as a good thing?

It is argued that palm oil is superior to other types of vegetable oil, as farmers are able to produce a lot more palm oil per square footage compared to other oil crops like sunflower or coconut. Globally, palm oil supplies 35% of the world's vegetable oil demand using just 10% of the agricultural land. It is also reported that oil palm trees do not require as many pesticides or fertilisers to be used when growing them compared to other types of crops. Perhaps most significantly, the palm oil industry is offering jobs and financial opportunities to people who live in poverty, largely in developing countries like Malaysia.



What is being done to help solve this problem?

In order for palm oil production to have less of a detrimental impact on the world, more needs to be done to help farmers to produce the oil more sustainably. In 2004, The Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was formed to try and deal with the environmental impact of palm oil. Members of the group are given strict guidelines about how they need to produce palm oil and there are high standards to adhere to.

What is being done in the UK?

In 2012, the UK Government committed to only using palm oil from sustainable sources. In 2016, 75% of the total palm oil imports to the UK were sustainable. Supermarket chain Iceland are the first big company in the UK who can claim all their own brand products are free from palm oil. Waitrose and Marks and Spencers only sell produce that contains RSPO certified palm oil. EU labelling laws have changed, so that products have to state specifically if they contain palm oil or not, which makes it easier for customers to make an informed choice. Chester is the first sustainable palm oil city in the world, as a result of a campaign led by conservationists at Chester Zoo. More than 50 organisations in Chester have committed to only using palm oil from sustainable sources. They hope they will be an inspiration to other cities to follow suit.

What is being done in the UK?

Look for the RSPO label when you are shopping, so you know you are buying products made with certified sustainable palm oil. If you buy something and see it has palm oil in it, but it does not have the RSPO label on it, then you could write to the company who made it and urge them to change their practice and only use certified sustainable palm oil.

