

EXHIBITION



When we eat biscuits or apply cream to our hands, a distant rainforest is probably the last thing on our minds. However, we should consider it, as the production of many everyday products significantly affects the environment and people in various parts of the world. This photo exhibition highlights the story of palm oil production and provides an exploration of the history, production, consumption, environmental and social impacts, and economic significance of palm oil. The red pulp of the fast-growing and prolific oil palm is used not only in food products but also in biofuels and cosmetics, from lipsticks to creams. While life under the palm tree may seem idyllic, the reality is much harsher. Studies show that oil palm cultivation and palm oil production often exploit child and slave labour, violate the land rights of indigenous peoples, and destroy the natural environment.



////////////////////////////////////

The use of palm oil dates back over 5000 years, primarily in West and Central Africa. Archaeological evidence suggests that ancient civilizations used it for cooking and medicinal purposes. European explorers in the 15th century noted the extensive use of palm oil in Africa. By the 19th century, palm oil had become a significant export from Africa to Europe, utilised in the manufacturing of soaps, lubricants, and margarine. In the early 20th century, the industrial cultivation of oil palms began in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, due to their favourable growing conditions. After World War II, technological advancements and substantial investments led to a surge in palm oil production. Plantations expanded rapidly in response to the global demand for edible oils and fats. In the late 20th century and up to date, the rapid expansion of oil palm plantations has been economically significant but environmentally and socially very problematic. Issues such as deforestation, habitat destruction, labour exploitation and displacement of indigenous communities have attracted international attention and criticism from many environmental and civil society organisations.

////////////////////////////////////



////////////////////////////////////

Palm oil is versatile, easy, and cheap to process. Extracted from the pulp of the African oil palm (lat. *Elaeis guineensis*), these trees first bear fruit about three years after planting and continue to produce for nearly 30 years. The main producers of palm oil today are Indonesia and Malaysia. Unfortunately, palm oil production is plagued by numerous human and labour rights violations. In these countries, most subsistence farmers earn extremely low wages, and plantation workers must work overtime to increase their earnings. A significant proportion of workers in Malaysian oil mills are migrant workers from Indonesia, India, and Bangladesh, whose wages are often reduced by recruitment fees. These workers spend years repaying loans taken out to travel to Malaysia. Additionally, banned toxic substances are used on plantations in many countries, posing serious health risks to workers and damaging the natural environment. Long working days and heat also contribute to workplace accidents.

////////////////////////////////////



////////////////////////////////////

The African oil palm has an exceptionally high yield, producing 4.5 times more vegetable oil per hectare than rapeseed, the second most productive oil crop. Palm oil has been used for nearly 5,000 years, primarily as a cooking oil. Since the mid-20th century, it has become a crucial raw material. The fruits, which weigh between 5 and 25 kg, are comparable to the weight of a small child. Sadly, child labour is another significant issue in the palm oil industry. According to the International Labour Organisation, 1.5 million children are employed in the Indonesian agricultural sector, mainly in North Sumatra and East and West Java. Child labour is also prevalent on Malaysian oil palm plantations in Sabah and Sarawak. Children often pick individual palm fruits and spray toxic substances on young oil palm trees, while older children collect palm bundles. Exploiting child labour helps palm oil producers keep prices low, denying these children a proper childhood and education.

////////////////////////////////////



////////////////////////////////////

Palm oil production involves three stages: planting the oil palm, harvesting the fruit, and regenerating the trees. Each stage is labour-intensive and, when conducted irresponsibly, pollutes and destroys the natural environment. Rainforests are being cleared for new plantations, often without consulting or compensating indigenous communities, leading to frequent land rights disputes. Indonesia's indigenous peoples, who have lived on and used this land for generations, are particularly affected. This land provides them with income, food, medicine, and building materials, and the loss of it disrupts their livelihoods. It is not uncommon for regional governments to sell land to large companies without consulting the local communities.

////////////////////////////////////



In Europe, palm oil is primarily used in food products, biofuels, animal feed, cosmetics, and detergents. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) estimates that palm oil is present in more than 50% of packaged products sold in shops, from biscuits to soap. Not all oil palm plantations are in tropical rainforest areas; many were once farmland used to grow rice or fruit. Many farmers choose to grow oil palms instead of rice due to the potential for quicker and better income. For example, in Indonesia, where rice has traditionally been produced locally, replacing rice fields with oil palm plantations could lead to rice imports and a decline in the quality of the local diet.



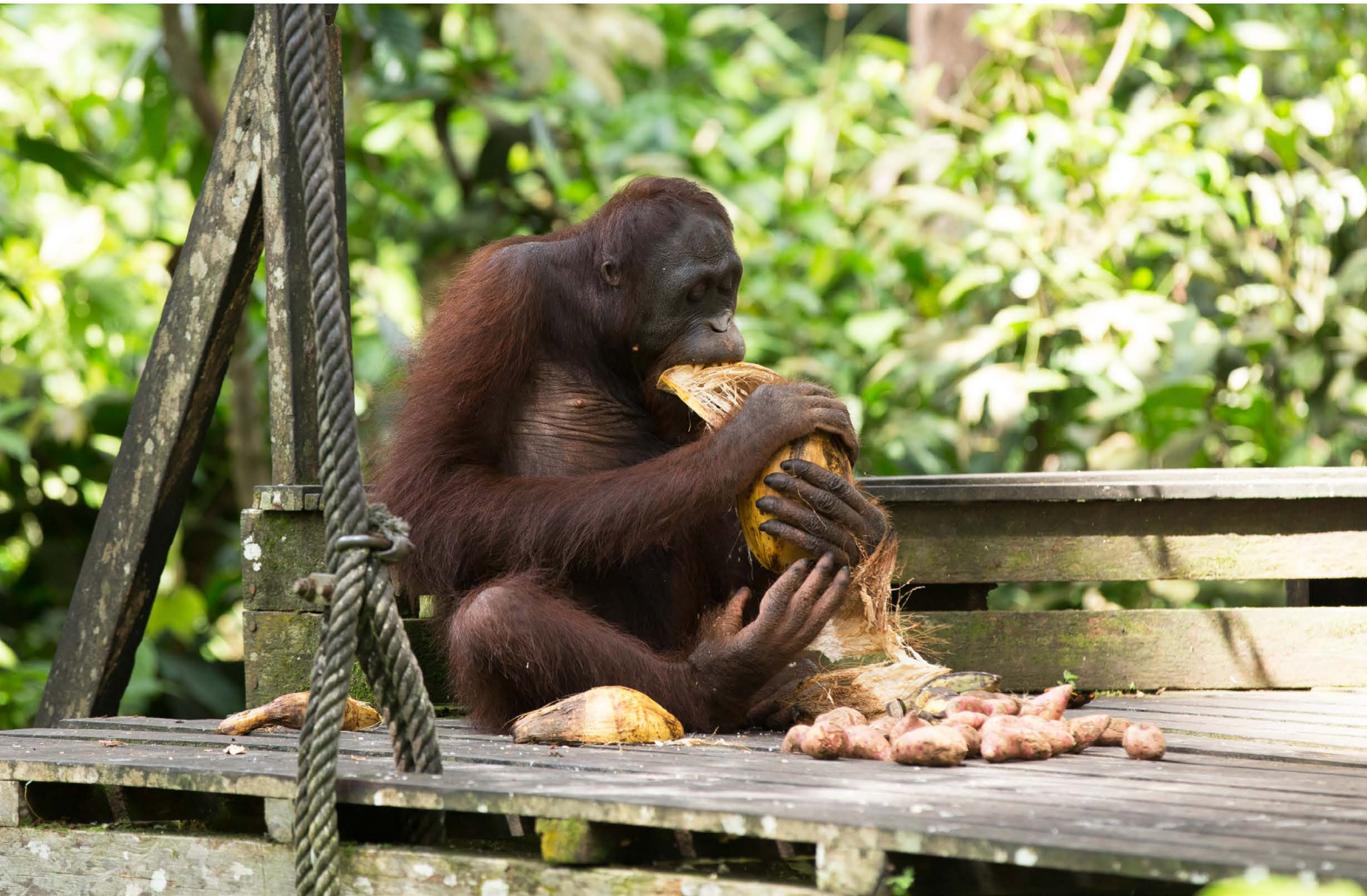
////////////////////////////////////

In 2023, 79 million tonnes of crude palm oil were produced worldwide, with 59% coming from Indonesia and 24% from Malaysia. The European Union consumes 11% of global production. Palm oil is widely used in Europe to make biscuits. Other major consumers include China, India, and Indonesia itself. Palm oil is a significant source of income for countries in the Global South. In 2022, palm oil accounted for 2.4% of Malaysia's GDP and 4.5% of Indonesia's GDP. Oil palm plantations are important employers in both countries, with Malaysia employing around half a million people and Indonesia over three million. Approximately 19 million hectares of land worldwide are dedicated to palm oil plantations, an area the size of Senegal or Syria, or more than 26.6 million football pitches. Indonesia alone accounts for around 57% of the global palm oil plantation area, with about 11 million hectares, while Malaysia accounts for approximately 26% with around 5 million hectares. Other countries with significant palm oil plantation areas include Thailand, Colombia, and Nigeria.

////////////////////////////////////



Oil palms require warmth and moisture to grow well. Their mass cultivation negatively impacts the flora, fauna, and inhabitants of equatorial rainforests and peatlands. Habitat for many species is being lost, and the lives of indigenous communities that depend on the rainforest are being irreversibly altered. Plantation companies and farmers often burn rainforests before the monsoon rains to gain more farmland. The forest is cut down, the tree logs are taken away, and the remaining stumps and undergrowth become a fire hazard. In recent years, forest fires have become so widespread that the smoke they produce spreads to surrounding towns. These wildfires release huge amounts of greenhouse gases, accelerating global warming. Fires in Indonesia produce more carbon dioxide per day than all industries in the USA combined. 70% of Indonesia's rainforests have been destroyed by the establishment of oil palm plantations.



////////////////////////////////////

The irresponsible production of palm oil devastates the environment. When a rainforest is converted into a plantation, the final stage is burning the remaining forest and causing the death of the animals that lived there. Deforestation affects the entire animal kingdom, including large mammals such as elephants, tigers, and sun bears. Orangutans, emblematic animals of the rainforest, have lost more than 90% of their habitat in Borneo and Sumatra due to oil palm plantations.

Palm oil plays a critical role in the global economy and is a key ingredient in numerous products we use daily. However, its production has significant environmental and social impacts that need to be addressed through sustainable practices and better regulation. By understanding these complexities, we can appreciate the importance of balancing economic development with environmental conservation and social responsibility. As consumers and global citizens, our awareness and actions can contribute to a more sustainable palm oil industry.

////////////////////////////////////



//////////

In response to growing criticism of palm oil production and its negative environmental impacts, and the growing global demand for sustainably produced palm oil, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was founded in 2004 and in 2022 app. 20% of palm oil was certified. Their mission is “to transform the palm oil industry to make it sustainable” ([RSPO](#), 2024). However, the RSPO certification system is heavily criticised by a number of environmental and civil society organisations as the specified sustainability targets and the implementation of social goals are not met. The critics stress the fact that palm oil production is undeniable destroying forests and the lives of the people where it is grown. One of the main criticisms is that the supply chains certified by the RSPO have numerous violations of their own certification standards, which is why the label is accused of “greenwashing”. As a result, the credibility of the RSPO is still questionable and many buyers do not trust it.

//////////