

Palm Oil

Palm oil has emerged as a major source of controversy after a Christmas advert by supermarket chain Iceland was deemed too political by regulators.

The advert, originally created by Greenpeace, features an orangutan mourning the loss of a forest home that has been destroyed to make way for palm oil plantations.

Many pointed out that far from being overly political, the film merely presented the devastating reality of the palm oil industry and the impact it is having on nature.

The debate will be nothing new to anyone who follows global environmental causes, or the plight of Indonesia's orangutans.

Despite well-established links to corruption, persecution of indigenous people and the creeping extinctions of iconic species, it remains a key ingredient in many everyday products.

What is palm oil?

A variety of vegetable oil extracted from the fruit and seeds of the oil palm, although it is native to parts of west Africa, the trees are mainly grown on enormous plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia, which produce 86 per cent of the world's supply.

Around 66 million tonnes of palm oil are thought to be produced every year and by some estimates the substance is found in half of all packaged goods in UK supermarkets.

Why do we need so much palm oil?

Used in an enormous variety of products, including shampoo, candles, lipstick, bread and chocolate, it has a range of useful properties that make it a useful cleaning agent, as well as aiding in the cooking process and improving the texture of foods.

It is also a critical component in fuels, with almost half the palm oil imported into the European Union used to make biodiesel. However, this demand is likely to subside under current plans to phase out palm oil for fuel by 2030.

Crucially, palm oil is cheap. Oil palms are very productive crops that produce a large amount of oil for relatively little cost.

Because of the enormous global demand, palm oil has become a major component in south east Asian economies, employing millions of people.

How does it harm the environment?

Oil palms grow well in low-lying, tropical regions, which tend to house rainforests and peatlands. They home to an array of endangered species including orangutans, rhinos and tigers.

The creation of massive plantations has meant these rich ecosystems have been replaced with monocultures – “green deserts” in which native animals and plants cannot thrive. Burning of forests to make way for palm pollutes the environment, and deforestation is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.

In total, palm oil plantations are now thought to cover more than 27 million hectares.

While palm oil development has brought great economic opportunities to some local people, it has also been linked with the persecution of indigenous groups as developers move in and seize land.

Why are orangutans particularly threatened?

Orangutans live high in the forest canopy and their habitat is a prime target for expanding palm oil operations.

Numbers of these great apes in Borneo have halved between 1999 and 2015, and this has been directly linked to palm oil. Not only has forest destruction robbed orangutans of up to 90 per cent of their homes, they are sometimes actively killed by those involved in the industry.

Greenpeace has recently identified food giant Mondelez, the maker of Cadbury chocolate, as responsible for destroying 70,000 hectares of habitat for these great apes since 2016.

What can people do to help?

Because palm oil is so pervasive, it can be difficult to avoid. Brands understand that people might be trying to avoid palm oil and often give it different names in their ingredient lists such as "vegetable oil" or "vegetable fat".

However, it is possible to purchase products made with palm oil deemed sustainable. The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil certifies some palm oil as sustainable if its production has been deemed socially and environmentally responsible, and consumers can look out for its label on products.

Non-government organisations have persuaded many of the biggest companies to sign global commitments to drop "dirty" palm oil, but there is a lot of scepticism about how effective these measures have been. Firms have been accused of only sticking to the most basic requirements for sustainability, meaning forests are still at risk.

So, consumers can police their own purchases, but they can also help by petitioning companies and piling on the pressure to switch over to palm oil production that does not compromise some of the most precious ecosystems on Earth.