

Palm oil – the issues

Christmas is just around the corner – and lots of people are thinking about trees. But not Christmas trees – palm trees!

It all began with an advert produced by a food company called Iceland. The advert told the story of an orangutan whose home was destroyed by producers of palm oil.

The advert was first created by an environmental organisation called Greenpeace. It was banned from TV in the UK because it was ‘too political’. However, millions of people watched and shared it on the internet.

Palm oil is everywhere

Look around your local supermarket: approximately half of all the things you can see will contain palm oil. It’s found in bread, pizzas, chocolate, shampoo and lipstick – and lots of other products! It makes things taste good, feel nice and look shiny.

What is palm oil?

Palm oil is a type of vegetable oil that comes from the fruit of oil palm trees, it is a super-efficient crop. One palm tree can produce a lot of oil – more than many other crops. The trees are easy to grow and don’t need many pesticides. Oil palm plantations in tropical countries provide work for thousands of people.

Dr Emma Keller, World Wildlife Fund (WWF): ‘Palm oil has provided jobs for millions of small farmers, helping them to get out of poverty’

So....what’s the problem?

Palm oil has become the world’s most popular vegetable oil and we need lots of room to grow the trees. Palm trees need a tropical (warm and wet) climate to grow, so some countries, such as **Indonesia** and **Malaysia**, are clearing huge areas of tropical rainforest to make room for them. The rainforest is being cut down to make space for other crops too, and for cattle-farming. This is called ‘deforestation’.

It is reported that an area the size of a football pitch is torn down in Indonesia’s rainforest every 25 seconds, with palm oil driving the destruction.

Animals like Orangutans, Asian elephants, Sumatran rhinos and Sumatran tigers live in these rainforests. When the trees are cut or burnt down, they lose their homes. Many of them die.

Other animals, birds, insects and plants lose their homes too. The world’s rainforests are full of lots of different species – we haven’t even studied some of them yet.

People who live in the rainforests have to move too, before the trees are burned down. The fires send a gas called carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. This pollutes the air, making it hard for people to breathe.

WWF Palm Oil Buyers Scorecard, 2016: ‘When palm oil is grown in the wrong place and in the wrong way, it can be devastating’



Orangutans in Indonesia



Palm nut fruits and palm oil



Palm oil plantation in Borneo



Oil palm plantation truck unloading palm fruit



Ripe palm fruits



Bad news for all of us – wherever we live

Carbon dioxide is a ‘greenhouse gas’: it makes the earth heat up. That changes our weather, making it more hot, windy and wet, and destroys ecosystems (networks of plants and animals).

Is there an answer?

Iceland used its Christmas advert to announce that it would stop using palm oil in its ‘own-brand’ products. But some people think that banning it completely could cause more problems. Other kinds of vegetable oil – like rapeseed or soybean oil – need more land. That could mean that more of the rainforest is cut down.

Perhaps the answer is to use a different kind of palm oil. Some palm oil is produced from ‘sustainable sources’ – it’s grown on plantations that haven’t destroyed the rainforest. This kind of oil is called ‘certified sustainable palm oil’ or CSPO.

WWF, 2016: ‘There is no excuse for any company not to be buying enough CSPO now to cover 100 per cent of its palm oil use’.



The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) says there is already enough CSPO for all of our needs. Lots of companies, large and small, already use it. The WWF has made a ‘scorecard’, showing which companies use CSPO: Boots and Marks and Spencer are top of the list!

Weblink: <http://palmoilscorecard.panda.org/>

Are you worried about palm oil in your own shopping basket? You could start to buy products that contain certified sustainable palm oil. This link shows you which products sold in the UK use sustainable palm oil.

Weblink: <https://www.actforwildlife.org.uk/get-involved/take-conservation-action/take-the-sustainable-palm-oil-challenge/shopping-list/>

If you love Jammie Dodgers – good news! They’re on the list.



How can I help?

There’s a lot you can do. Take a careful look at labels to make sure the products you buy use sustainable palm oil. Email the companies that make these products to tell them why you think it’s important.

But you might need to take a dictionary shopping with you – is ‘palm fruit oil’ the same as palm oil? And what about ‘palmitic acid’? You guessed it – they’ve all got something to do with palm oil!

Palm trees aren’t usually Christmas trees – but this year Iceland has made us all think a lot more about them. Will it make you change the way you shop?



1. Draw yourself in the circle to become a detective!
2. Answer the questions below to complete your mission.

A. Tick 'true' or 'false' for the statements below.

Statements	True	False
1. Palm oil is used in lots of products found in supermarkets.		
2. Palm oil grows in cold and dry countries.		
3. Palm oil is a type of vegetable oil.		

B. Circle the correct answer.

4. Palm oil plantations can be found in which country?

- a. United Kingdom
- b. Malaysia
- c. Sweden

5. What is the term for the clearing of rainforests?

- a. Destruction
- b. Deforestation
- c. Hacking

6. CSPO stands for...

- a. Care standards for palm oil
- b. Country specific palm oil
- c. Certified sustainable palm oil

C. Draw three animals that are affected by deforestation.

D. Why do you think it is important for companies to use CSPO?
