



Palm Oil Sustainability

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Palm oil is a feedstock and used in the confectionary, cosmetics, detergents and bio fuels industries. Palm oil is currently the most heavily utilized vegetable oil in the world, largely due to the efficiency with which it can be produced. In developed markets, it is used in approximately half of all packaged foods, personal care, and cleaning products. Millions of people, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, depend on palm oil for their livelihoods. While it contributes significantly to the economies of the producing countries, its rapid expansion has caused widespread environmental degradation. Oil palms are originally from West Africa, but were brought to South-East Asia at the beginning of the 20th century.



There is little doubt that palm oil production has contributed to deforestation and therefore increased greenhouse gas emissions and reduced biodiversity. It has also caused land disputes. Environment protection organisations and consumers have raised concerns about these issues in the past. If production continues to increase, these problems will be exacerbated. In response to these environmental and social concerns, the conservation group WWF teamed up with the palm oil industry to launch the Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), a not-for-profit organisation that aims to unite stakeholders from all sectors of the palm oil industry, including environmental and social NGOs. It aims to produce palm oil without causing deforestation or harming people. However, sustainable palm oil has been under fire for several years from environmentalists and organisations who feel it is nothing more than a greenwashing scheme. This view did not improve within the environmental community upon the formation of the RSPO in 2004, but others feel that this widely accepted certification scheme has the potential to prevent deforestation. The RSPO is currently the largest sustainability-focused organisation within the palm oil sector. However, its standards do not completely ban deforestation or the destruction of peat lands for the development of oil palm plantations, but only restrict it within defined guidelines.

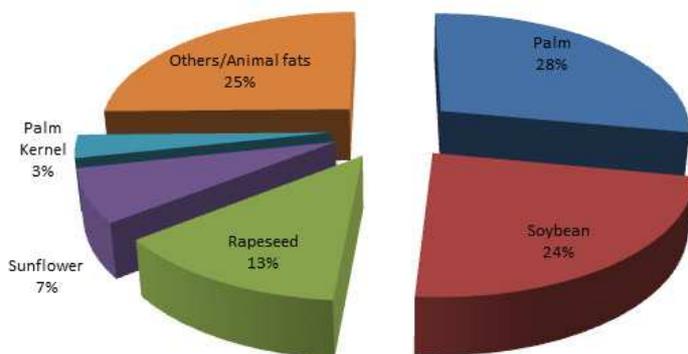
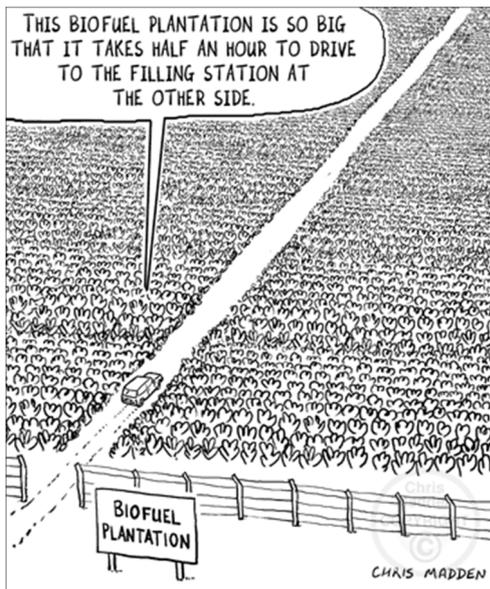


FIG. 6. World production of palm oil vis-à-vis other vegetable oils in 2011. Source: OIL WORLD Annual of May, 2012, ISTA Mielke GmbH, Germany.

The expected continuing future demand for palm oil has led to efforts to find viable alternatives. However, finding a substitute for palm oil is no easy task. Any solution must be able to meet the demand and will also require land to be available in the right locations. It must also be affordable, be acceptable to buyers, end users and governments. Additionally, it needs to be sustainable from a production as well as from a health point of view. Alternative vegetable oils include soybean, rapeseed, and coconut as well as

less common jatropha and jojoba. These have all passed the hurdle of technical feasibility but still present challenges in terms of affordability, acceptability, and sustainability.



In this respect, demanding that products be free from palm oil with no alternative to hand is no solution. Consumers who feel they are acting responsibly are neglecting the fact, that by replacing palm oil with another vegetable oil, we would only see similar increases in deforestation and environmental damage due to increased production of the other options. It is easy to blame the industry, but it is a practical constraint that one cannot substitute every single raw material on our planet that has an environmental impact with something that has none! Besides, nowadays palm oil based ingredients come with a sustainability certificate as a standard – at least in Europe. But everything that is seemingly sustainable on a small scale sooner or later becomes unsustainable from one or more perspectives when scaled up. For example, bio fuel from crops competes with food production for land resources; solar and wind power plants also require raw materials and produce toxic by-products during plant manufacture in addition to the land resources that they consume; fossil fuels influence the climate through CO₂ emissions, and so on...

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