

Learn the facts, save their forest homes.

PALM OIL FACT SHEET

WHAT IS PALM OIL?

Palm oil is harvested from the fruit of African oil palm trees (*Elaeis guineensis*). Although these trees are native to West Africa, they thrive in hot, rainy climates and can be easily grown throughout the world. Oil palm trees are now an important crop in Southeast Asia, with millions of tons produced in Indonesia and Malaysia per year. Palm oil is currently the most widely produced edible vegetable oil in the world.

Due to its long shelf life and semi-solid state at room temperature, palm oil is quickly replacing other vegetable oils in packaged foods such as potato chips, chocolate, cookies, cereals, ice cream, snack bars, and even pet food. Palm oil is also used to fry foods such as doughnuts and french fries. In addition to food, palm oil is used in cosmetics and household products such as toothpaste, lotion, body wash, shaving cream, face make-up, and cleaning supplies. And with the current need for alternative energy sources as the human population increases, palm oil is also being studied as a potential bio-fuel in many countries, including the United States. Consequently, the demand for palm oil is rapidly rising worldwide.

HOW DOES IT AFFECT ELEPHANTS?

Traditionally, oil palm trees were farmed on a small scale alongside other crops. Now, a rising demand is causing Southeast Asian forests to be cut down in order to make way for oil palm plantations. However, these forests provide some of the last remaining wild habitat for endangered animals, including orangutans, sun bears, tigers, and Asian elephants. Consequently, this large-scale destruction is creating huge problems for wildlife.

Asian elephants in particular are facing new threats with the expansion of oil palm plantations. Although they have long been hunted for their ivory, elephants are now facing pressures from habitat destruction. As the elephants' forest homes are cut down, they lose their sources of food, water, and shelter. In addition, people are expanding and building villages on land once occupied by elephant herds. This often causes human-elephant conflict, which can sometimes be fatal for people and elephants alike.

HOW CAN I HELP?

The good news is that although the problems seem big, the solutions can be simple! Shop smart and be an informed consumer. Boycotting palm oil altogether is not the answer - when harvested sustainably, palm oil can provide an excellent source of income for small-scale farmers and support local economies. Choose products made with sustainable palm oil and companies that are members of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (download the guide at www.elephanttag.org/professional/professional_palmoil_awareness.html). Then, spread the word! Tell your friends and family about the importance of choosing sustainable palm oil and write to companies and government officials to encourage them to learn more. Together, we can make a difference for elephants and their forest homes!



Content adapted from the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo's Campaign for Sustainable Palm Oil and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil's website. Information Current as of December 2010.