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FEATURE FOCUS

Palm oil boycott will not protect rainforests

By Ian Wood

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Although the impact on deforestation and bio-diversity has been immense, the palm oil industries in Malaysia and Indonesia have become vital to their respective economies.

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Such is their importance that a new approach has been called for in the way that NGO's and conservationists engage with the palm oil industry.



A palm oil plantation (left) and an orang utan in the Malaysian rainforest (right)

Speaking at the first international palm oil sustainability conference in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, biologist Dr David S Wilcove said that simply calling for boycotts of palm oil from South East Asia is unrealistic and ineffective in conserving the regions rainforests.

"In the context of its tremendous economic importance, it must be recognised that the notion of boycotting palm oil is impractical and unrealistic. It is simply not an approach that will work," said Dr Wilcove.

Palm oil is now a huge export industry in both Malaysia and Indonesia and also contributes directly to health, education, and infrastructure in rural areas.

Dr Wilcove believes that the answer is to increase awareness of the environmental issues with the palm oil producers. One of the key problems is converting virgin forest to palm oil plantations, which results in a massive decline in species.

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Dr Wilcove and his colleague Dr Lian Pin Koh have been studying the bio-diversity of birds and butterflies in primary forests, logged forests, rubber and palm oil plantations.

"We found a 77 per cent decline in forest bird species upon the conversion of old-growth forest to oil palm plantations. For butterflies, the decline was 83 per cent," he explained. "By comparison, 30 years after logging secondary forest retained roughly 80 per cent of the original forest species," Dr Wilcove said.

"The focus of new oil palm establishment should be on degraded and cultivated lands like grasslands and rubber plantations," he said. "Both primary and secondary forests are important for the persistence of biodiversity."

Indonesia already has a huge availability of suitably cleared land but new palm oil plants do not produce a crop for 4 years. This leads companies to subsidise these non-productive years by clearing forested land and selling the timber.

However there is an argument that preserving virgin rain forest and bio-diversity could actually benefit the palm oil industry by reducing the need for pest management.

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Harvested palm oil fruit (right) and being loaded onto a truck for transportation (right)

"Doing so may not only lower production costs but could also reduce the damaging effects of pesticides to both plantation workers and the environment, as well as satisfy a growing consumer preference for oil palm products produced through environmentally-friendly practices," said Dr Wilcove.

"Oil palm producers need biodiversity, and people need palm oil. Therefore, conflicts between oil palm expansion and biodiversity conservation will not be solved by each side portraying the other as villains," he said. "Instead, both sides must talk to each other and search for innovative solutions to these issues."

If this new approach could be made to work it would have far reaching benefits to the forests and wildlife of South East Asia. The biggest threat for orangutans in Borneo and Sumatra comes from the deforestation of virgin forests to be converted to palm oil plantations.

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