



MEDIA RELEASE

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Oil Palm Expansion Single Biggest Threat to Biodiversity

Scientists have argued that industry sponsored disinformation campaigns are hindering efforts to slow the rapid expansion of Oil Palm plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia. In their recent article published in *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, Dr Lian Pin Koh and David S. Wilcove are likening the campaign by the palm oil industry to the one energy companies waged against efforts to curb climate change.

According to Koh & Wilcove the efforts by conservationists to curtail deforestation due to oil palm could have been undermined by “the aggressive public relations campaigns undertaken by the oil palm industry to promote public acceptance of palm oil and to dismiss the concerns of conservation biologists and environmentalists”.

One of the arguments put forward by proponents of the palm oil industry is that scientists should compare the biodiversity of oil palm plantations to other industrial monocultures, not the rainforests they replace. They claim that “biodiversity that exists in the oil palm plantations is a bonus for all to benefit”.

However, a recent comprehensive review of the impacts of growing palm oil production conducted by Emily Fitzherbert from the Zoological Society of London and University of East Anglia refutes this claim. The review asserts that “degraded forest, and even alternative crops such as rubber and cocoa, supported higher numbers of species than oil palm plantations”. Fitzherbert’s research found that conversion of primary rainforest to an oil palm plantation results in a loss of more than 80 percent of species.

The palm oil industry also claims that since 1990 oil palm expansion has not threatened biodiversity because land used for oil palm cultivation has been mainly converted from former rubber, cocoa and coconut cultivation, and not rainforest land. However, data compiled by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization suggests that during the period 1990–2005,



55%–59% of oil palm expansion in Malaysia, and at least 56% of that in Indonesia occurred at the expense of forests.

Oil palm is now one of the most rapidly expanding crops in the world. Between 1961 and 2006, oil-palm cultivation increased globally from less than 9 million acres to more than 32 million acres. Palm oil is forecast to be the world's most produced and internationally traded edible oil by 2012. Malaysia and Indonesia account for 83 percent of production and 89 percent of global exports.

Koh and Wilcove maintain that to safeguard tropical biodiversity a prohibition on the conversion of primary or secondary forests to oil palm is urgently needed. They argue that “until that happens, oil palm might well be the single most immediate threat to the greatest number of species”.

To help stop illegal clearing of rainforests in Indonesia you can make a donation to Rainforest Rescue's “Indonesia Orangutan Habitat for Survival Project“ at www.rainforestrescue.org.au

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About Rainforest Rescue

Not for profit organisation Rainforest Rescue protects and restores rainforests in Australia and internationally. Rainforest Rescue's projects re-establish rainforests through planting, maintenance and restoration programs, as well as purchasing and protecting high conservation value rainforest and preserving its biodiversity.

More Information

[http://www.cell.com/trends/ecology-evolution/fulltext/S0169-5347\(08\)00349-2](http://www.cell.com/trends/ecology-evolution/fulltext/S0169-5347(08)00349-2)

<http://livingbird.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=787>

<http://ceopalmoil.blogspot.com/2008/11/creating-fine-balance-for-development.html>

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/120696728/abstract?SRETRY=0>

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