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Palm oil

Palm oil is a risk to both the environment and your health. Is there any hiding in your pantry?

Updated: 5 Aug 2010 | Author: Clare Hughes | ★★★★★ : Member rating

01 .Introduction

Over the past decade, palm oil has appeared in about half our packaged foods, often hidden as unspecified “vegetable oil”. Environmentalists argue its production is driving rainforest destruction, affecting native habitat and massively increasing global greenhouse emissions.

What is palm oil?

It comes from the fruit of the oil palm, a small tree native to West Africa - where it has been used for centuries - and is now also grown in other tropical countries.



- Commercial palm oil plantations have ballooned in the past two decades - it's a high-yielding crop that is relatively cheap for food producers to use.
- Perfect for packaged products with a long shelf-life - a high saturated fat content means it remains more stable and solid than many other oils when used in processed foods.
- Most palm oil is exported for use in processed food in China, the EU and India.
- There are increasing efforts by producing countries to also promote its use as a biofuel.

Many food manufacturers have switched to using palm oil in a rush to remove unhealthy trans fats from their products.

[WWF Australia](#) believes half of all packaged foods in Australia now contain palm oil, including some potato chips and various sweet and savoury biscuits. It is also found in some cosmetics (where it is sometimes labelled as *Elaeis guineensis*) and some cleaning products.

Effects on heart health

Palm oil contains more than 50% saturated fat, although it is also rich in carotenoids (antioxidants). It does not contain cholesterol, but can cause raised total cholesterol and “bad” cholesterol levels, depending on the levels of other fats in the diet.

The [WHO](#) believes there’s convincing evidence that palmitic acid (which is found in palm oil) increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases, and [The National Heart Foundation of Australia](#) recommends avoiding palm oil due to its high level of saturated fats. It’s important to remember that the impact of palm oil on heart disease may be affected by a range of other lifestyle and dietary factors, such as lack of exercise, stress, the amount of other saturated or trans fats consumed, as well as hereditary factors.

02.Social and environmental impacts

Rainforest and animal threats

Widely considered to be the greatest immediate threat to forests and biodiversity in South-East Asia, with the [UN Environment Programme](#) (UNEP) predicting that by 2022, the palm oil industry could wipe out 98% of Indonesia’s remaining forests. In Malaysia, from 1990 to 2005 more than a million hectares of forest were cleared for its production, accounting for most of the country’s deforestation during this period.

Plantations are almost always set up on forested land so that companies can also reap the profits from logging. This has caused habitat destruction for a multitude of animal and plant species; research shows that in southern Peninsular Malaysia, conversion of rainforest into oil palm plantations has resulted in a loss of 77% of bird populations and 83% of butterfly populations.

The orang-utan and the Sumatran tiger are the highest-profile species under threat. A 2007 UNEP report suggests that, if the current pressures continue, wild orang-utans will be virtually wiped out within as little as two decades. Sumatran tigers have lost almost half their habitat in the past 10 years, and fewer than 400 survive today.



Climate change

Clearing and burning forest for oil palm plantations also creates massive greenhouse emissions. This pollution is far worse where plantations are established on peat bogs, which release huge amounts of carbon when drained and burned. Deforestation caused almost 12% of all human-induced greenhouse gas emissions in 2008, and oil palm is recognised as one of the largest driving forces behind this land-clearing.

The threats of deforestation and greenhouse emissions from oil palm plantations are so grave that the World Bank has now

suspended lending to palm oil producers until safeguards are developed to ensure lending doesn't cause further social or environmental harm.

Palm plantations

Oil palm agriculture has undoubtedly improved the lives of rural people, including up to six million Indonesians, many of whom were living in poverty. However, traditional landowners are often encouraged to relinquish their land rights when joining an oil palm development and are consequently disempowered in negotiations with palm oil companies.

Health threats faced by plantation workers, include exposure to pesticides as well as chemical pollution of drinking water. Huge quantities of palm oil effluent are produced by processing factories, which can pollute waterways and threaten the health of millions.

03.Action on palm oil

Many community and NGO campaigns have sprung up in recent years in response to the increasing environmental and social threats of the global palm oil industry.

- [Greenpeace International](#) has put pressure on large food companies such as Nestlé to switch from palm oil or at least buy from sustainable palm oil producers. As a result, Nestlé has recently brought forward its commitment to source only from sustainable palm oil suppliers.
- [WWF Australia](#) is campaigning for all large Australian manufacturers and retailers with private labels to use only certified sustainable palm oil by 2015, and has produced a scorecard of companies according to their palm oil use.
- In response to the scorecard, Woolworths has committed to switching to 100% certified sustainable palm oil in its own brand products, while manufacturer Goodman Fielder will seek sustainable palm oil for its retail-branded products.
- [Palm Oil Action](#) (an Australian group) believes consumer pressure persuaded KFC and Cadbury to remove palm oil from their products. Last year, KFC announced it would switch to a canola-sunflower blend in response not only to environmental campaigns targeting palm oil, but also government pressure to reduce the saturated fat content of its food.
- [Zoos Victoria](#) has run the "Don't Palm Us Off" campaign calling for the labelling of palm oil in all Australian food products, as a step towards reducing the deforestation of orang-utan habitat in South-East Asia. In 2009, independent senator for South Australia, Nick Xenophon, proposed a bill to mandate labelling of foods as containing palm oil or certified sustainable palm oil. This was supported by 80,000 signatures from the Zoos Victoria campaign as well as CHOICE and the Heart Foundation, but was opposed by the food industry and to date has not become law.

If you can, avoid palm oil altogether or consume only certified sustainable palm oil. Limit your intake of foods labelled as containing palm oil and be cautious about unspecified vegetable oils listed on food labels.

We'd like food manufacturers to replace palm oil wherever possible with healthier oils that are sustainably sourced. Where no suitable alternative exists, manufacturers should be required to use only certified sustainable palm oil. We also want labelling laws to make it mandatory for food labels to list palm oil in the ingredients list, rather than hiding it as unspecified vegetable oil.

The certified oil debate

The [Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil](#) (RSPO) was formed in 2004 to promote more environmentally and socially sustainable palm oil products. RSPO's members include producers, traders, manufacturers, retailers and investors, as well as environmental and social groups, including WWF. To date, RSPO has certified 1.5 billion tons of "sustainable" palm oil.

The RSPO has been criticised by some conservation organisations that claim it is overly influenced by the industry's economic desires. Although certified oil is "produced without undue harm to the environment or society" as defined by RSPO criteria, it does allow some clearance of peat forests or other endangered ecosystems.

Certified sustainable palm oil is nevertheless an improvement on business as usual. Although the Western market is far smaller than the Asian one, consumer support for certified products, rather than a simple boycott on palm oil in general, could have a beneficial knock-on effect across the industry.

04. Check your pantry for palm oil

[Palm oil](#) is used extensively in processed foods like snacks, chocolate, biscuits and crackers. Manufacturers don't have to declare it in the ingredients list and many simply label 'vegetable oil' which could come from anywhere - canola, palm, soybean or sunflower.

Some manufacturers are more helpful than others and declare the use of palm oil in their ingredients lists. Below are some products we've found declaring palm oil as an ingredient.

NOTE: This is just an indication of the types of products where palm oil is used. Similar products made by other manufacturers may contain palm oil but the manufacturer unhelpfully lists 'vegetable oil'.

So far we've found palm oil listed as an ingredient in:

- You'll Love Coles Cup Noodles, Chicken Flavour
- Coles Smart Buy 2 Minute Noodles, Chicken Flavour
- Coles Original Water Crackers
- Coles Smart Buy Original Cracker Biscuits
- Coles Smart Buy Garlic Bread (2-pack)
- Coles Apple Pie 600g
- Go Natural Yoghurt Almond & Apricot Bar
- Leda Gingernut Cookies
- Kellogg's Nutri-Grain Bar Original
- Kellogg's K-Time Twists Strawberry and Blueberry
- Nong Shim 'Shin Ramyun' Cup Noodle Soup, Hot & Spicy
- Kraft Easy Mac, Cheese flavour



In our submission to the review of food labelling laws and policy we've called for new labelling laws that require manufacturers to declare the source of vegetable oil on ingredients lists so that consumers can avoid products containing unhealthy and unsustainable palm oil.

Tell us which products you've found declaring palm oil as an ingredients in our [Comments](#).

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