

EMBARGOED UNTIL:
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“Cruel Oil” Report Exposes Palm Oil’s Impact on Health & Environment

Plantations Clearing Rainforest, Threatening Already Endangered Species, Says CSPI

WASHINGTON—Palm oil has long been known to promote heart disease, but a new report from the nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) says that palm oil production also promotes destruction of the rainforest, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia. Further loss of forest may push endangered animal species, including orangutans, Sumatran tigers, and Sumatran rhinos, into extinction.

Production of palm oil is spiking upward, partly because some food manufacturers are seeking alternatives for partially hydrogenated oils, which promote heart disease. CSPI strongly urges manufacturers to replace partially hydrogenated oils, but to switch to the most healthful oils possible. Companies that must use palm oil should use as little as possible and obtain it from environmentally sustainable sources, says the group.

Palm oil is the world’s second-most-produced and internationally traded edible oil, according to CSPI’s report, *Cruel Oil: How Palm Oil Harms Health, Rainforest, & Wildlife*. More than 80 percent of the world’s palm oil comes from Malaysia or Indonesia—where it is mostly grown on land that once was rainforest or peat-swamp forests. When those forest areas are cleared, habitat for endangered animals is destroyed.

“We applaud food manufacturers for moving away from trans-fat-laden partially hydrogenated oils, and happily, many companies are switching to such heart-healthy oils as soybean, corn, or canola,” said CSPI executive director Michael F. Jacobson, who co-authored the report along with wildlife ecologist Ellie Brown. “Consumers and food processors should realize, though, that palm oil still promotes heart disease and that producing palm oil has a devastating impact on rainforest and endangered wildlife.”

One reason some food processors use palm oil is that it is semi-solid at room temperature, making it useful in products such as cookies, crackers, spreads, and bars. Palm oil is also less expensive



than soy and other vegetable oils. Some of the products that use palm oil, sometimes in combination with other oils, include Pepperidge Farm Oatmeal Cranberry cookies, Voortman Vanilla Wafers, Nabisco Golden Oreo cookies, Cadbury Finger Dark Cookies, and many products sold at “health food” stores. However, a new generation of more-healthy vegetable oils also shows promise for foods that require a more solid fat. High-oleic canola or sunflower oils are now being used in some products. A new trans-fat-free version of Crisco shortening is made with a blend of liquid soybean oil and fully hydrogenated soybean oil.

While partially hydrogenated oils now have a well-deserved bad reputation, CSPI says some companies have tried to paint a healthy halo around palm oil. Labels for various Newman’s Own products, for instance, use statements like “contains no trans-fatty acids” and “can be grown organically in tropical regions,” which make it sound as if palm oil is beneficial both for human health and the environment.

Most palm oil is produced in Malaysia or Indonesia. Production in Indonesia has grown more than 30-fold since the mid-1960s, to the point where almost 12,000 square miles are planted in oil palm. In Malaysia, 11 percent of the total land area (about 62 percent of the country’s agricultural land) is devoted to palm oil. Companies sometimes profit from selling logs from the rainforest and then burn the area to make way for oil palms. The associated road-building, soil erosion, air and water pollution, and chemical contamination also have contributed to the loss of wildlife habitat and the displacement of indigenous peoples.

“Consumers should understand that a seemingly small decision in this country—what kind of cookie, cracker, or hand lotion to buy—can have major consequences on the other side of the world,” said Brown.

CSPI’s report highlights five endangered animals:

- Sumatran tiger. The Sumatran tiger is one of only five remaining tiger subspecies, reduced from eight by recent extinctions. Only 250 of these animals may exist in the wild.
- Bornean and Sumatran orangutans. These are the only great apes that exist outside of Africa. Both species are in crisis and may well become extinct within ten years. One study found that the orangutan population decreased by 45 percent in the 1990s, and much of their remaining habitat is slated for conversion to oil palm agriculture.
- Asian elephant. Only about 2,900 elephants are estimated to remain in all of Sumatra, 800 in peninsular Malaysia, and 1,000 in Borneo. The home range of one family of elephants is about 25 to 65 square miles, so a breeding subpopulation of 20 elephant families would need to roam over about 500 to 1,300 square miles. Other Asian elephants survive in other countries.
- Sumatran rhinoceros. The two biggest threats to the Sumatran rhino are illegal hunting and habitat loss. Road building shrinks the animals’ travel corridors and makes them more accessible to poachers. Their total population is estimated at fewer than 400.

CSPI, Environmental Defense, the International Primate Protection League, Rainforest Relief, WALHI/Friends of the Earth Indonesia, and a dozen other organizations from around the world are urging the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other international aid agencies not to fund oil-palm development projects.

In addition, 14 scientists today called on the Department of Health and Human Services to encourage food processors to move away from partially hydrogenated oils and palm oil and toward more healthful oils.

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Note: *Cruel Oil: How Palm Oil Harms Health, Rainforest, & Wildlife* is available at www.cspinet.org/palmoilreport or by sending a check for \$3.00 to Cruel Oil, CSPI, 1875 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, DC 20009.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is a nonprofit health-advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., that focuses on nutrition, food safety, and pro-health alcohol policies. CSPI is supported largely by the 900,000 U.S. and Canadian subscribers to its *Nutrition Action Healthletter* and by foundation grants.