

EAZA Guidelines on Palm Oil



Approved by EAZA Council

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The European Association of Zoos and Aquaria recognises and is concerned about the impact of unsustainable palm oil production on biodiversity and habitats worldwide. Across the EAZA region, there are different approaches and interpretations of how best to address this impact on biodiversity and habitats worldwide. This document aims to provide EAZA Members guidance by providing a summary on the topic and recommendations on how to get involved at an institution, association and political level.

The Palm Oil Subgroup of the Imported Forestry and Sustainable Agriculture Working Group will continue to guide members through supportive actions to limit these impacts through the support of sustainable production of palm oil and the rejection of unsustainable (non-certified) palm oil. Our sub-group recognizes that sustainable palm oil, as defined by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), has recently, in 2018, undergone further improvement towards a deforestation-free and more transparent process, but nevertheless, it requires further evidence to show a positive measurable impact on ecological processes. The group will continue to work with the membership to develop a Position Statement about palm oil production and consumption, and additional support material in the form of procurement guidelines.

Background information

Agricultural development (e.g. rice, wheat, soy, beef, pulp) and overexploitation are one of the largest threats to threatened species, sensitive ecosystems and habitats.

Whereas surface planted with oil palms at a global level is relatively small, this commodity is grown in tropical regions where it, when grown unsustainably, replaces sensitive ancient rainforests that house the World's richest biodiversity or destroy peat swamp forests with a huge negative impact on climate change. Oil palm plantations produce 5-6 times more oil per hectare than any other vegetable crop (e.g. soy, sunflower, raps) in 20-28 years cycles. Despite occupying less land than competing vegetable oil crops, it is the most significant vegetable oil by volume in the World today. Palm oil is a versatile oil that is used in a large proportion of food commodities (e.g. chips, chocolate, animal foods), cosmetics (soaps, toothpaste, creams), plastic materials, and biofuel. Its rapid development in South East Asia is currently used as a model for further expansion in many other developing nations throughout Africa and Latin America.

The versatility and profitability of palm oil resulted in a rapid increase in the demand throughout the 1990s, which resulted in an unprecedented expansion of plantations, primarily in Malaysia and Indonesia, which are the world's two largest palm oil producers. Often, land bank expansion resulted in extensive clearing of sensitive tropical rainforests with little concern for local people, biodiversity and the environment.

Between 1973 and 2015 an estimated 18.7 Mha of Borneo's old-growth forest were cleared (Gaveau et al. 2016), and vast tracts of peat swamp forests were drained, causing unprecedented regional forest fires, such as during the El Nino event of the 1997-1998. As a result, most of South East Asia became engulfed in thick smoke that caused the human societies billions of dollars in social and environmental cost. Unfortunately, the devastating event repeated itself in the 2014-2015 season reminding all that, despite positive steps to improve the "sustainability" of the production of palm oil and other commodities, agriculture at large remains a serious threat to environmental integrity and ecological processes. Consequently, many threatened species (e.g. all the three species of orangutan, Sumatran elephant, Sumatran tiger, gaurs) are declining fast, along with a range of important habitats (e.g. peat swamp, lowland forest, heath forest and mangroves).

In 2004, the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was formed as a response to the demand for "responsible" agricultural practices and to try to minimize the negative consequences of oil palm development on the environment and on people. With a goal to prevent the conversion of natural habitats and put in place sustainability criteria, RSPO is the most comprehensive and acknowledged palm oil certification scheme today. It gathers a wide range of stakeholders, including growers, commodity traders, banks, environmental and social NGOs and government bodies. Malaysia (Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil – MSPO) and Indonesia (Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil – ISPO) also have their own certification schemes, which are mandatory as opposed to the voluntary RSPO scheme, but they currently fall behind RSPO's standards. The RSPO standards were improved significantly in 2018 with the release of the new Principles and Criteria (P&C). For example, one of these improvements was Principle 7 stating 'no new planting on peat regardless of depth', which is a significant step in reducing the impact of new plantations on climate change. However, there are still some weaknesses in these new guidelines, such as the paucity of provision to address and mitigate the impacts of palm oil processing (refineries); the paucity of guidance to monitor and manage High Conservation Value elements recognized as such, and etc. More importantly, possible impacts of RSPO implementation on biodiversity and ecosystems have not been quantified precisely yet.

Whereas RSPO enjoys broad acceptance as the most robust palm oil certification scheme available today, there remain critical issues that must be improved, before the "sustainability" certificate is reliable. In short, RSPO is doing a good job of ensuring "due diligence" in relation to new palm oil development and, consequently, setting aside important and sensitive conservation areas. However there has been little progress in demanding continued management of these areas for species conservation; yet many

sustainability certificates continue to be issued without putting in place mechanisms to document "sustainability". This is a key area where further progress needs to be made.

The Europe block is one of the three largest consumer markets for palm oil, the other two being India and China. Unfortunately, calls for sustainable standards for these two latter markets remain limited. In 2015, palm oil consumption in Europe made up 11.9% of global palm oil consumption. Consequently, Europe can play a more significant role in promoting sustainable palm oil by demanding quality and reliable certification systems that reflects sustainability in its true form.

In this sense, EAZA with an outreach to over 140 million visitors a year can play a key role in highlighting to the public the impact of such commodities on biodiversity and lead the way in facilitating a shift to a more sustainable global palm oil market by informing the public how their day-to-day choices can contribute making a global difference.

Key considerations:

Although responsible for significant environmental damages, palm oil is a legitimate food crop for a large part of the World's communities. The palm oil industry, if developed meaningfully, can play an important role in employment and economic growth for communities in tropical countries.

Members should be aware that blanket boycotts of palm oil in Europe, although chosen by some ethically until sustainability standards improve and can reduce overall consumption, may drive demand elsewhere and thus also result in deforestation for alternative sources of vegetable oils.

Considering the current predictions for the increase of the global demand of vegetable oil over the next few decades, the first recommendation should be for a general reduction in the use of all vegetable oils to lower agriculture pressure globally.

The second recommendation should be to ensure responsible agriculture by promoting certified palm oil and boycotting (or rejecting) non-sustainable palm oil.

Palm oil production without integrated social and environmental concerns will only benefit a handful of, often overseas, investors and cause significant loss to the local societies and communities in the form of ecosystem services (e.g. clean water, food, clean air, fisheries, non-timber forest products). Indiscriminate deforestation without concerns for ecological processes and ecosystems result in unnecessary high contributions to greenhouse gases (GHG) being emitted into the atmosphere, and large-scale habitat loss for a range of endangered species.

To avoid the extinction of threatened species in areas such as South East Asia, the link between palm oil production and deforestation must be broken.

The new Principles and Criteria (P&Cs) for the production of RSPO Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO) were strengthened in 2018, although more improvements are necessary, especially for the processing part of the industry (refineries). The new P&Cs give the progressive parts of the industry the adequate tools to indicate their interest to act sustainably.

The RSPO/CSPO trademark provides a recognisable label, enabling consumers to select products from companies to demonstrate their support for more sustainable practices and maximise consumer influence on the industry. Achieving clear labelling of palm oil on all food and grocery products provides transparency and choice for the consumer, and positively positions those companies already using CSPO and making this clear on their packaging. There are tools available in some European countries to show companies who are leading the way on sourcing CSPO where labelling hasn't been achieved on product packaging.

Recently the [IUCN Oil Palm Task Force](#) released a situation analysis on oil palm and biodiversity¹. This analysis found that a move towards deforestation free sustainable palm oil and the cessation of non-sustainable palm oil production is a vital solution to the palm oil issue. However this report also acknowledged the lack of empirical evidence of the potential benefits of palm oil certification on the reduction of the levels of damages on biodiversity associated with palm oil development.

Where possible and relevant, EAZA Members are recommended to:

- Overall, cautiously support certified palm oil and boycott non-certified palm oil.
- Support (but acknowledge the current limits of) the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil to drive a sustainable palm oil industry, and particularly support the production of labelled and traceable Certified Sustainable Palm Oil and its associated processes (including reviews of the *Principles and Criteria*). Membership and involvement in working groups of the RSPO is the decision of the individual Member.
- Where possible, engage actively in improving the RSPO-certification standards by promoting management and monitoring of conservation areas, including species and populations.
- Collaborate with RSPO in improving the certification system so that audits focus on IMPACTS of actions rather than the actions themselves.
- Work with the RSPO working Groups to develop new approaches to measuring biodiversity in sustainable plantations.
- Collaborate and offer expertise to certification bodies (e.g. RSPO, ISPO, MSPO) to promote landscape based effective platforms for meta-population management of key species.
- Engage actively with growers with a genuine interest in improving biodiversity conservation to effectuate important conservation action on-the-ground.

¹ <https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/47753>

- Create awareness about and encourage visitors to learn more about CSPO, in order to maximise consumer influence and where the option is available in country, encourage support and purchasing of sustainable palm oil and ban the use of unsustainable palm oil. Activities should include, but not limited to, education and information, consumer advice and facilitating consumer voice and choice.
- Engage with industry and government in their country (as Members or National Associations) where possible to encourage improvement of standards within the RSPO scheme and increase support for sustainable palm oil through the Amsterdam Declaration Commitment to Support 100% sustainable palm oil in Europe by 2020.

References

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