

Biodiversity and Oil Palm

mitigating the impact of palm oil production on wildlife

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A delicate balancing act between people, profit & wildlife

- Three million people are employed by the palm oil sector in Indonesia
- Indonesia exports \$8 billion of palm oil a year
- Indonesia's tropical lowland forests are one of the most biodiverse ecosystems on earth



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The Critically Endangered Sumatran tiger is one of the key species affected by oil palm expansion

Palm oil that doesn't cost the earth?

Oil palm is a remarkably efficient crop which provides the majority of the world's vegetable oil and valuable revenue for the developing countries where it is grown. Abandoning palm oil production is not a realistic option, but the continuing expansion of oil palm plantations is a key factor in tropical biodiversity losses, particularly in Indonesia. This project seeks to identify practical ways to reduce impacts on wildlife and implement these changes within the industry.



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Losing ground to oil palm

Between 2002 and 2007, ZSL carried out research in Indonesia to determine the impacts of oil palm on biodiversity, particularly the Critically Endangered Sumatran Tiger (www.zsl.org/tigerreport).

Unsurprisingly, this showed that oil palm plantations are a poor substitute for the forest they frequently replace, as only around 15% of forest species are able to utilise the oil palm habitat. Most severely affected are those whose future is already bleak. Reduction of the total area of their primary habitat and fragmentation of what remains means coping with oil palm expansion is an intense challenge for these species. But seemingly worthless areas of unplanted and degraded land, which are often found within and around plantations, could provide crucial 'stepping stones' or corridors between larger areas of forest in the surrounding landscape.

ZSL has been awarded a grant from the Biodiversity and Agricultural Commodities Programme to provide technical assistance to the industry in minimising its impacts on biodiversity. BACP require matching funds from industry and these, along with research sites, are coming from palm oil company Wilmar International. Our previous research and scientifically objective approach make us ideally placed to guide the changes that are urgently needed.

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RSPO

Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

The palm oil industry has a significant impact on local people and the environment, for which it has attracted substantial criticism. In 2004, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was established to enable the different players in the industry, from the growers to the retailers, to work together with various NGOs to address these concerns. The aim of this organisation is to promote a standard of palm oil production that is socially, economically, and environmentally acceptable. Reducing impact on biodiversity is a key environmental consideration and the Biodiversity Technical Committee has been established to address this issue.

Joining the RSPO is voluntary, but by doing so members make a commitment to abide by a set of rules (the RSPO Principles and Criteria). Once an oil palm company feels it meets this standard, this must be independently verified before they can claim that their palm oil is 'sustainable'.

Long term project visions

Although far from perfect, the RSPO represents the only realistic vehicle for mitigating the negative impacts of the palm oil industry. Membership is increasing steadily and the number of companies seeking certification is gaining momentum.

Biodiversity is one of the many issues addressed by the RSPO's standard for sustainable palm oil. Crucially, these criteria state that plantations must identify and protect species and habitats with High Conservation Value. Whilst this is good in theory, there is insufficient guidance and limited national support to assist companies in achieving it, which is hampering progress at present.

Over the course of this project ZSL will develop much needed practical information and advice on **how** the palm oil industry can mitigate the impact it has on biodiversity. Our participation in the RSPO's Biodiversity Technical Committee will ensure that this guidance is made widely available to those responsible for making changes on the ground. At present, national regulations and the demands of local policy makers can also hinder implementation of the RSPO's requirements, so we will also work to address these barriers.

Project outputs

Between 2009—2011 this project will focus on oil palm plantation field sites in Sumatra and Kalimantan to:

1.) Develop guidance for implementation

This will include the establishment of an information portal for oil palm and biodiversity research, a stimulus package to encourage local researchers, the development of a biodiversity tool for identifying which species are affected, and experimental field testing of key management options for impact mitigation.

2.) Reduce policy-related barriers to implementation

After a legal gap analysis to determine the overlap between the demands of the RSPO and Indonesian law, recommendations will be made for reform. Regional policy makers will be engaged to encourage the incorporation of RSPO biodiversity requirements into spatial planning.

Project collaborators



More Information

For more information on this project please contact Sophie Persey (Sophie.Persey@zsl.org) or Dr. Tom Maddox (Tom.Maddox@zsl.org) www.zsl.org/indonesia | www.oilpalm-biodiversity.info

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