



## PALM OIL PLANTATIONS



COMMITTEE: ENVIROSOC

Palm oil is derived from the fruits on African oil palms, but its acquirement and high demand can and has caused many environmental issues. The industry was brought over from West Africa and first introduced on a large scale in Indonesia and Malaysia, the two countries which are simultaneously economically benefitting and hit hardest by the production. As palm oil is used in at least half of the products available at the supermarket, sometimes under the umbrella of 'vegetable oil', it is in high demand. This results in mass deforestation to make room for plantations and occasionally this process is carried out illegally.

Deforestation emits high levels of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and ponds of wastewater at the refineries release a mass amount of harmful methane. Both gases are known to affect climate change and, by extension, global warming. In June 2013, Singapore faced a wave of severe smog due to fumes emitted from forest fires over on the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

Not only is the atmosphere affected, but when space is made for the plantations, a lot of wildlife lose their habitat and biodiversity is greatly lessened. One of the main species affected are the orangutans, who face the possibility of extinction within the next ten years if the growth of palm oil plantations does not lessen or find a sustainable solution.

The main benefit of the palm oil industry is the plethora of job opportunities it offers to poor people in developing countries, allowing them to build a career and a more stable way of life. Furthermore, the industry is overall worth billions of pounds and the palm oil trees don't require as many pesticides or fertilisers as other oil crops when in the growth and cultivation stages. Generally speaking, the oil palms are a very productive crop.

However, issues involving child labour and land being taken from indigenous people are closely tied to palm, oil production. Local people face poor working conditions, sometimes against their human rights, and feel themselves totally dependent on the industry if they want to have a life at all.

The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was established in 2003 to work on how to stop the immense damage the industry is causing. They have set up guidelines on how to produce the oil in a sustainable fashion. Yet with the industry being so large and spread out, it is hard to monitor whether the guidelines are being followed correctly.

Alternatives for palm oil are being researched and developed. For example, microalgae is being used to produce oils for biodiesel by a Californian company. Nonetheless, demand for palm oil will most likely remain high and even increase over the coming years despite the frightening consequences.

### To consider

- Should the cultivation and use of palm oil be stopped completely?
- What can be done to improve the working conditions of the farmers without jeopardising mass production?
- How can the UN ensure the palm oil produced is truly sustainable?