

THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT SEEMS to have lost all sense of logic. It has just announced that it will give Critically Endangered orangutans as gifts to countries that buy large quantities of its palm oil. That's like Britain promising to give a free badger to anyone who destroys a badger sett. The lack of logic is jaw-dropping.

Malaysia's Plantations and Commodities Minister, Johari Abdul Ghani, claimed that giving orangutans to trading partners such as the EU, the USA and China would "prove to the global community that Malaysia is committed to biodiversity conservation". But maybe a better way of demonstrating a commitment to biodiversity conservation would be to commit to biodiversity conservation (and to keep the orangutans in their natural habitat)?

'Palm oil' is rather like 'sub-prime mortgages' or 'saturated fat' – just hearing those words sends an automatic signal to the brain that says 'bad', though we're not entirely sure why. Put simply, the main reason orangutans and many other Critically Endangered species are hurtling towards extinction is primarily because, for decades, their rainforest homes have been bulldozed to make room for industrial-scale palm oil plantations by large companies in pursuit of massive profits at any environmental cost.

Palm oil is a key ingredient in nearly half of all household products, from pizzas and chocolate to deodorant and toothpaste. It is also in great demand for so-called environmentally friendly biofuel (which is more than a little ironic given that clearing native forests for palm oil contributes up to 4 per cent of annual global greenhouse gas emissions).

The scale of the problem is almost unimaginable. I'll never forget flying from Kota Kinabalu to Tawau, in Malaysian Borneo, over a never-ending expanse of palm oil plantations. Vast swathes of what was once tropical rainforest had been cleared to make room for row upon row, mile upon mile, of identical palm trees. The orangutans and all the other native wildlife that once lived there had gone.

Orangutans are found in only two countries – Malaysia

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Between 2,000 and 3,000 orangutans are killed every year

"It's like Britain giving a free badger to anyone who destroys a badger sett"

MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

and Indonesia – and these produce 85 per cent of the world's palm oil. There are three recognised species: Bornean (population approximately 35,000–50,000 – down from 288,500 in 1973); Sumatran (population fewer than 13,000); and Tapanuli (fewer than 800, hanging on in a tiny forest in northern Sumatra). They are all in serious trouble.

So what is the answer? Well, perhaps surprisingly, it's not a boycott. That would probably backfire – by increasing demand for other oils, such as soy, sunflower and rapeseed, which need up to 10 times as much land as palm oil.

First, we need an immediate moratorium on converting rainforest into palm oil plantations. (There is plenty of non-forested land available, but it is cheaper and easier to bulldoze tropical rainforests – and, of course, the timber can be sold to make

extra profit.) Second, all palm oil needs to be produced sustainably, by small palm oil farmers. Third, retailers and consumers must be able to identify sustainable sources. And, finally, palm oil biofuel should be banned.

In the longer term, the palm oil industry also has an enormous legacy of destruction – it must heal the damage.

Malaysia, under intense pressure from the EU, conservation groups and consumers, is very slowly cleaning up its act.

But there is a long way to go before its palm oil can be declared sustainable.

The Malaysian minister likened his new strategy of giving away orangutans to China's policy of lending giant pandas to foreign zoos to give people a warmer feeling towards China. But he's achieved the exact opposite. For me, at least, it elicits an icy cold feeling towards Malaysia. **W**

"There is plenty of non-forested land, but it is cheaper and easier to bulldoze tropical rainforests"



MARC ANDERSON/ALAMY