



# Mark Carwardine's **AT A GLANCE...**

02

## PALM OIL

### WHAT IS PALM OIL?

Palm oil is a vegetable oil derived from the fruit of a tree called, rather unimaginatively, the oil palm *Elaeis guineensis*. The species is native to West Africa, but will grow almost anywhere in the tropics.

### WHAT IS IT USED FOR?

It is found in about half of all household products, from processed foods such as biscuits and ice cream to soap and lipstick, though consumers are unaware because most of the time it is listed simply as 'vegetable oil'. This is changing, thanks to a campaign orchestrated by the Sumatran Orangutan Society. By December 2017 all food products sold in the EU must list palm oil where it's used. But that's not the case for cosmetics, and palm oil is also in great demand as a biofuel – which is ironic, because it is staggeringly bad for the environment.

### WHY IS IT SO TERRIBLE?

Swaths of tropical rainforest are being bulldozed to make way for oil palm plantations; when the forests go, so does most of the wildlife, and it's thought that palm oil production could be the most immediate threat to the greatest number of species on the planet. Clearing forests also releases huge quantities of greenhouse gas, while the rights of local communities are often ignored, and indigenous people are forcibly removed.

### HOW MUCH FOREST IS BEING CLEARED?

The area that is used for the production of palm oil

worldwide has quadrupled since the early 1980s to 170,000km<sup>2</sup>. Indeed one estimate suggests that up to 2km<sup>2</sup> of forest is cleared every hour to make room for plantations. Some of them are established illegally, but most are created with government permission, often after changing the boundaries of national parks and reserves.

### HOW BIG IS THE MARKET?

Huge. The worldwide demand for palm oil has increased sharply over the past few years, to more than 60 million tonnes annually, and continues to grow.

### WHICH COUNTRIES PRODUCE PALM OIL?

Palm oil is grown throughout the tropics, but 85 per cent of it comes from just two countries: Indonesia (50 per cent) and Malaysia (35 per cent). Sumatra and Borneo, with their orangutans, elephants, tigers and rhinos, are particularly hard hit. Thailand, Colombia, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea and Ecuador are also major palm oil producers.

### IS THE PALM OIL INDUSTRY DOING ANYTHING TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM?

Major palm oil growers, producers and buyers formed the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) in 2004, to establish a 'green' certification scheme. But it still doesn't rule out the clearing of rainforest, and completely ignores its impact on climate change. Meanwhile most of the world's largest food and cosmetics



If we want tigers to survive, we should use our purchasing power responsibly.

## “PALM OIL COULD BE THE MOST IMMEDIATE THREAT TO THE GREATEST NUMBER OF SPECIES ON THE PLANET”

**MARK CARWARDINE** is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

● Every month he demystifies some of the most important issues affecting the world's wildlife and assesses the organisations that protect it.

companies are clueless as to whether their palm oil is environmentally friendly or not. 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, creating an additional financial incentive.

### IS THERE A SOLUTION?

We need an immediate moratorium on converting rainforest into plantations, but the ultimate solution is for purchasers of palm oil – both retailers and consumers – to be able to identify sustainable sources.

### WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

Avoid those products that definitely contain palm oil from unsustainable sources – the Rainforest Foundation's guide (see below) is thorough and easy to understand, and will help you shop responsibly. 🐼

● Download the Rainforest Foundation's excellent guide to products containing palm oil: <http://bit.ly/1WcgEH5>