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Inquiry into Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labelling – Palm Oil) Bill 2009

Submission from Prof Colin Groves

I would like to record my strong support for this Bill, and submit as follows:

For climatic reasons (increase in greenhouse gases, decrease in rainfall) removal of rainforest is never desirable. Such factors are, however, beyond my present purview and my professional expertise. Well within my purview and my expertise, and the reason for my submission in favour of the Bill, are the consequences for wildlife and biodiversity. Among the species liable to extinction as a result of the widespread replacement of Indonesian and Malaysian rainforest by oil palm plantations are the following:

- Bornean orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*). Although its total world population may still total over 50,000, this is being rapidly reduced by habitat removal.
- Sumatran orangutan (*Pongo abeli*). Already critically endangered, the numbers being now reduced to under 6000. It should be added that in the case of orangutans, which are phylogenetically so close to us, whose intelligence is so astonishing, and whose emotional reactions are so like our own, one can say that there is an extra incentive for their preservation, even beyond their immense scientific value.
- Proboscis monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*). Largely restricted to mangrove and riverine habitats in Borneo. On the Kinabatangan River and its tributaries, in Sabah, it has been found that the habitats of this charismatic species, which tourists travel specially to see, has been halved over the past 15 years, oil palm plantations having encroached in some places almost up to the edge of the rivers.
- Bornean elephant (*Elephas [cf maximus] borneensis*). A few years ago it was shown by Fernando et al., using DNA, that this is quite distinct from all other Asian elephants; more recently, Lord Cranbrook and colleagues made a good case that it is in fact a remnant of the historically significant elephant of Java. Its present population is confined to northeastern Borneo.
- Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*). One of the world's most endangered large mammals; its total world population has been estimated at under 300. It occurs in tiny populations in Borneo and on the Malay Peninsula as well as in Sumatra. It is the last surviving remnant of a separate lineage that separated from other rhinos perhaps as long as 18 million years ago, so is of extraordinary scientific value.
- Sumatran tiger (*Panthera [cf tigris] sumatrae*). A colleague and I a few years ago proposed that this is not merely a subspecies of "the one-and-only tiger", but a distinct species. Its population is reduced to a few hundred, and it lives in Sumatra only.

These constitute only a choice selection of the large mammals which will become extinct unless the expansion of oil palm plantations is stopped, and if possible reversed. I do not write of the tremendous diversity of small mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, freshwater fish and invertebrates which are equally threatened by oil palm expansion. I cannot comment on the fate of the indigenous peoples of the region, who depend on forest products for their livelihood. Nor can I comment on the motives of the palm-oil entrepreneurs who are willing to destroy their country's (and the world's) precious heritage. My concern is to try to save, if possible, the biological diversity of Southeast Asia's rainforests, which has been handed down to us by previous generations, and which is in such imminent danger of disappearing before we in turn can hand it on to future generations. My reasons are scientific, practical (their ecological role), aesthetic and emotional.

There seems to be increasing awareness of the destructive role of palm oil among the Australian public. Those wishing to avoid buying products containing palm oil should be given the information they need to do so.

I would like to recommend this Bill to all members of the Australian Parliament.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colin', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Colin Groves