



**Government of Western Australia
Zoological Parks Authority**



SUBMISSION TO THE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

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

**ON BEHALF OF
ZOOLOGICAL PARKS AUTHORITY (PERTH ZOO)**

MARCH 2010

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INTRODUCTION

The Western Australian Zoological Parks Authority (Perth Zoo) is seeking the introduction of mandatory labelling of palm oil in food products on the grounds that palm oil production, unless undertaken in a sustainable manner, is threatening the survival of wildlife, and that consumers have the right to be provided with accurate information to enable informed choices about the food products they are eating and purchasing.

The drivers for this submission are Perth Zoo's first-hand knowledge of the devastating impact of unsustainable palm oil production in Indonesia through the Zoo's in-situ conservation projects, ongoing work with the Sumatran Orangutan which is seriously threatened with extinction, and the community's growing concern on this matter.

Recognised for its work supporting threatened species in the wild, Perth Zoo is the most visited zoo on a per capita basis in Australia - attracting over 630,000 visitors last year. The Zoo has a strong focus on community education, conservation and research.

BACKGROUND

The devastation of wildlife, specifically orangutans in south-east Asia, due to unsustainable palm oil production

In South-east Asia alone, the equivalent of 300 soccer fields are deforested every hour for palm oil plantations. In addition to fuelling global warming by releasing vast quantities of CO² into the atmosphere, this unsustainable practice is pushing species such as the Sumatran Orangutan to extinction.

The growth in palm oil plantations is contributing to deforestation, threatening wildlife and increasing greenhouse gas emissions. There has also been criticism of the industry's use of underage labor.

The clearing of forests for the production and cultivation of palm oil – which is found in a wide variety of processed food products - is destroying orangutan habitat at an alarming rate. Originally from western Africa, the oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) has become the plantation crop of the 21st century. Where heat and regular rainfall combine, it can flourish. South-east Asia has become its home with ever-increasing areas being given over to this high-yielding crop.

Since the early 1990s, the global area under palm oil cultivation has increased by about 43%¹, mostly in Malaysia and Indonesia. These two nations, which account for 83% of the global production of palm oil², contain the ever-shrinking habitat of one of our closest relatives, the orangutan.

Clearing of forests for what has become unsustainable production in these countries is leading to what the United Nations calls a state of emergency that could see the extinction of the orangutan in the wild in the next decade.

According to the United Nations, 98 per cent of Indonesia's forests may be destroyed by 2022³. Achim Steiner from the UN Environment Programme notes that the cause of the accelerated destruction of habitat is "not the impoverished farmers, but what appears to be well-organised companies with heavy machinery and strong international links to the global markets."⁴

Plantation owners are rapidly clearing rainforest, chopping or setting fire to the vegetation. As forests are cleared, displaced orangutans - facing starvation - desperately seek food in the developing plantations and are consequently considered an agricultural pest⁵. It is estimated that approximately 6,000 orangutans are killed every year as a result of this situation. Orangutan babies are often separated from their slaughtered mothers and then sold into the illegal pet trade.

The clearing of rainforest for its timber and conversion into oil palm plantations must end to prevent the decimation of the Sumatran Orangutan species – a species which shares 97% of its DNA with humans.

Perth Zoo's Conservation Work in Indonesia

Perth Zoo has been involved in the conservation of the critically endangered Sumatran Orangutan for 40 years. It has one of the world's largest breeding colonies of Sumatran Orangutan and, in partnership with the Indonesian Government and other conservation agencies, is involved in habitat protection and species conservation projects in Java and Sumatra.

Perth Zoo's work in Sumatra focuses on the Bukit Tigapuluh ecosystem which is home to a reintroduced population of Sumatran Orangutans as well as Sumatran Tiger, Sumatran Elephant, Sun Bear, Tapir, Binturongs and many other species of flora and fauna. The orangutans are either rescued ex-pet or orphaned orangutans, the majority of which have suffered terribly due to loss of their habitat, poaching and the slaughter of orangutans.

¹ Associated Press, "Malaysia calls for sustainable expansion of palm oil plantations". 5 January 2010. http://grasp.rucc.net.au/files/malaysia_calls_for_sus_po_7.12.06.pdf

² Nellemann, The Last Stand of the Orangutan: State of Emergency: Illegal Logging, Fire and Palm Oil in Indonesia's National Parks. United Nations Environment Program. 5 January 2010. http://www.unep-wcmc.org/resources/PDFs/LastStand/full_orangutanreport.pdf

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nellemann, The Last Stand of the Orangutan: State of Emergency: Illegal Logging, Fire and Palm Oil in Indonesia's National Parks. United Nations Environment Program. 5 January 2010. http://www.unep-wcmc.org/resources/PDFs/LastStand/full_orangutanreport.pdf

A Perth Zoo born orangutan has also been released at Bukit Tigapuluh – a world first – to help increase the numbers and genetic diversity of the reintroduced population. The orangutan reintroduction program is an international effort involving various agencies from around the world and has the support of the Indonesian Government.

Perth Zoo's work in this region includes: the funding of trained Wildlife Protection Units which patrol the Bukit Tigapuluh National Park to help stop illegal logging and poaching; support for the orangutan reintroduction program; and the funding of an open orangutan sanctuary. The sanctuary provides specialist care for orangutans that may never be able to return to a completely wild life due to the horrendous circumstances and treatment they endured prior to their rescue. It is hoped that the offspring of these sanctuary orangutans will be able to live in the wild and further boost orangutan numbers.

Consumers' Rights to Information to Make Informed Choices

Raising awareness of the impact of unsustainable palm oil production on orangutans and many other threatened species that rely on the rainforest has highlighted the fact that Australians are unable to make an informed choice on palm oil because it is not labelled clearly on most food products. This leaves consumers and concerned citizens in the position of unknowingly contributing to the crisis. Up to 40% of supermarket products are believed to contain palm oil⁶ and the average Australian unknowingly consumes approximately 10kg of palm oil each year⁷.

Along with other zoos across Australia, Perth Zoo is part of a national "Don't Palm Us Off" campaign seeking public support for changes to food labelling legislation in Australia to introduce mandatory labelling of palm oil on all food products. Members of the public and our visitors are being asked to add their name – via postcards or an on-line form – to a petition to mandate the labelling of products containing palm oil and register their support for the right to know if the products they purchase contain palm oil. The campaign began in August 2009, with around 100,000 signatures collected as at March 2010 and the number of signatures climbing daily. This support is evidence of the community's desire for greater transparency in the use of palm oil and its production.

A primary aim of the "Don't Palm Us Off" campaign is to educate members of the public about palm oil production and its devastating impact on wildlife and biodiversity. Most palm oil that ends up in the food on Australian supermarket shelves is unsustainably harvested and an end product of the destruction of orangutan and virgin jungle habitat.

It is reported that only one to four percent of the palm oil used comes from sustainable sources. This underscores the need for the introduction of a system to certify sustainably harvested and produced palm oil, in addition to the introduction of a mandatory labelling requirement for palm oil. This will give consumers the choice of selecting products containing sustainably produced palm oil. Put simply, appropriate mandatory labelling and certification is required to enable consumers to make an informed choice.

⁶ Hickman, The guilty secrets of palm oil: Are you unwittingly contributing to the devastation of the rain forests? *Independent.co.uk*. 2 May 2009. <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/the-guilty-secrets-of-palm-oil-are-you-unwittingly-contributing-to-the-devastation-of-the-rain-forests-1676218.html>

⁷ Palm Oil Action Group. See www.palmoilaction.org.au/images/palm-oil-action-brochure.pdf

Section 2A of the current *Food Standards Australia New Zealand Act 1991* (FSANZ Act) states:

“The object of this Act is to ensure a high standard of public health protection throughout Australia and New Zealand by means of the establishment and operation of a joint body to be known as Food Standards Australia New Zealand to achieve the following goals:

- (a) a high degree of consumer confidence in the quality and safety of food produced, processed, sold or exported from Australia and New Zealand;*
- (b) an effective, transparent and accountable regulatory framework within which the food industry can work efficiently;*
- (c) the provision of adequate information relating to food to enable consumers to make informed choices”*

The provision of adequate information relating to food sources enables consumers to make informed choices about whether the food products they purchase are contributing to the destruction of orang-utan (and other threatened species’) habitat. With heightened awareness amongst the general community of environmental issues - particularly when it relates to loss of biodiversity and habitat - information on the sustainability of food production is equally as important as the source, quality and safety of food.

A desired outcome is that food companies will only source palm oil from sustainable producers as this is what consumers will come to expect, with an end to the cycle of forest clearing and the slaughter of endangered animals for the unsustainable production of palm oil.

A more sustainable industry will help protect the forests and many animal species as well as workers in the industry. The flow-on broader benefits of protecting biodiversity will become increasingly important as the world grapples with climate change and global warming.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Amend the FSANZ Act to require FSANZ to develop a standard mandating the use of the words “Palm Oil” in the ingredients list of all packaged foods which contain any quantity of palm oil and palm oil derivatives regardless of whether or not the palm oil has been certified by a credible certifying body.
2. Amend the FSANZ Act to include a requirement that FSANZ develop and approve labelling standards that ensure food manufacturers and producers distinguish between those manufacturers that source palm oil from credible certified sources and those that do not.
3. Develop a system that enables the clear identification and labelling of palm oil from a certified sustainable source.