
Asian forests lost to pet's market

Often hidden, neglected or unknown, the underlying causes of deforestation are multiple and varied. And even odd.

Maybe many people are rather familiar with the idea that overconsumption in high-income countries constitutes a major underlying cause of deforestation but not so aware that pet's consumption patterns share responsibility for the disappearance of forests.

According to The Guardian (1) a new study for the British Department of Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) – Mapping and Understanding UK Palm Oil Use (2) – reports that Great Britain imports more than half a million tonnes of palm oil a year but even more palm kernel meal – a lucrative by-product of the production of palm oil. Palm oil comes from the oil palm's fruit, while kernel meal comes from palm nuts. Great Britain imports five times as much kernel from Indonesia as palm oil and more than a tenth of all the world's palm kernel meal mostly for animal feed.

“British cats, dogs, cows, pigs and even goldfish are helping destroy the rainforests of south-east Asia”, says The Guardian, pointing to manufacturers of animal feed AB Agri, owned by Associated British Foods, and BOCM Pauls, plus the commodity trader ED&F Man as major actors.

Oil palm is mainly grown on large scale tree plantations. Malaysia and Indonesia have become the largest producers and exporters of palm oil. In those countries the expansion of the industrial plantations of oil palm that cover millions of hectares has decimated forests and encroached territories of indigenous communities (see WRM Bulletin 134).

The oil palm business also has heavy impact on the environment as a consequence of the several million tons of solid oil wastes, palm fiber, and shells it causes as well as other several million tons of palm oil mill effluent, a polluted mix of crushed shells, water, and fat residues that have a negative impact on aquatic ecosystems. Further, most palm- oil cultivation need the use of petroleum-based pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers thus not only polluting on a local level but also contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. (3)

A medium-size dog has roughly twice the ecological footprint of a Toyota Land Cruiser, say New Zealand Robert and Brenda Vale (4). (An ecological footprint is the average amount of land and sea required to create a product and then absorb its waste).

It's not about starving pets but reflecting on how pets in rich countries have become another market niche where the environmental costs of (over) consumption are hidden and big corporations reap unaccountable profits.

(1) “UK animal feed helping to destroy Asian rainforest, study shows”, Fred Pearce, The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/may/09/pet-food-asian-rainforest>

(2) Mapping and Understanding UK Palm Oil Use, Proforest, April 2011, http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Document.aspx?Document=EV0459_10154_FRA.pdf

(3) Why is oil palm replacing tropical rainforests? Why are biofuels fueling deforestation?, Rhett A. Butler, mongabay.com, April 2006, http://news.mongabay.com/2006/0425-oil_palm.html

(4) "The environmental impact of pet food", Nina Shen Rastogi, 2010, <http://www.slate.com/id/2244902/>