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Sustainability Certification Reduced Oil Palm Driven Deforestation

New Study finds Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil certification significantly reduced deforestation in Indonesian oil palm plantations

Honolulu, HI (Dec. 11, 2017) — A [new study](#) published today in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* provides novel insight into how voluntary corporate sustainability policies can conserve tropical forests. The study's authors estimate that sustainability certification by the [Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil \(RSPO\)](#) significantly reduced deforestation in Indonesian plantations — but that the actual area conserved was surprisingly small. These findings demonstrate the potential value of certification as a tool for conservation, while highlighting what changes are necessary to improve on-the-ground impacts.

Utilizing a new database of oil palm plantations combined with satellite imagery of deforestation, the authors estimate that certification by the RSPO reduced – but did not eliminate – deforestation in certified Indonesian plantations by about 30 percent, compared to what would have happened in the absence of certification. The authors also write that certification did not affect fire occurrence in these plantations, or the amount of carbon-rich peat swamp forests cleared and drained for oil palm.

“We were pleased to see this positive effect, given that NGOs have substantiated real cases of deforestation within plantations held by RSPO members” said Dr. Kimberly Carlson, lead author of the study based at the University of Hawaii. “However, because palm oil companies have initially chosen to certify well-established plantations containing relatively few remaining forests, certification currently benefits less than one percent of the forests within Indonesian oil palm plantations.”

Dr. Robert Heilmayr, co-lead author on the study at the University of Santa Barbara, notes that “RSPO certification has saved 21 km² of forests that would have been deforested. Putting this into perspective, this is one tenth the size of the home range of an endangered Bornean Elephant. To save more forests, we need to think of new incentives that encourage companies to conserve forest pro-actively, rather than just

avoid deforestation. The mechanisms available to companies to protect conservation set-asides within plantations are limited.”

David Burns, a co-author at the National Wildlife Federation, said “These findings show that products bearing the RSPO label are less likely to contain palm oil produced on recently deforested lands, so by purchasing certified palm oil, you are supporting a reduction in deforestation, as well as increased transparency in the oil palm industry. But to truly meet corporate ‘zero-deforestation’ pledges and consumer needs, the RSPO needs to do more, such as adopting satellite-based monitoring of forest patches within plantations, and extending protections to secondary forests, in addition to all peatlands.”

- Palm oil is a leading driver of tropical deforestation in Southeast Asia, and particularly in Indonesia. About twenty percent of global production is now certified as sustainable by the RSPO, which, on paper, suggests some level of protection for forests and areas with rare or endangered species.
- Despite these protections, several high-profile [NGO campaigns](#) have accused RSPO member companies of practicing deforestation, in violation of corporate commitments and consumer demands, calling into question the value of the scheme.
- More than 100 companies with exposure to oil palm driven deforestation have made “zero deforestation” pledges.
- A historic lack of certified plantation location data has made objective quantification of deforestation very difficult. Now, using information extracted from publicly available plantation audit reports, the authors have developed a new database to conduct the first rigorous econometric analysis of RSPO certification.
- For greatest impact on deforestation, the RSPO should target oil palm companies that are expanding on forest frontiers, instead of those with long-ago developed plantations. All RSPO member companies should follow their time bound certification plans.
- RSPO-certified plantation data will soon be published on [Global Forest Watch](#)

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