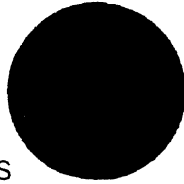




Palm oil plantations help destroy orangutans

EARTH FIRST

with ISABEL HIGGINS



THE other day, Bush Telegraph (ABC Radio National, 11am) explored the relationship between the palm oil industry and the progressive disappearance of those great apes, the orangutans of Borneo and Sumatra.

(In Malay, orangutan mans 'wild man').

In an interview, Tony Guilding, vice-president of GASP, the Great Apes Survival Project, said that of the 6000 orangutans left in Sumatra, last year 1000 were lost, while in Borneo we could expect their extinction in the wild in less than 10 years.

Why is this? Well, it turns out that these 'wild men' have the misfortune to have a preference, as do the oil palms, for living in the lowland areas of these countries, while any national parks are situated in the mountainous areas that nobody wants, because they are unsuitable for economic use.

So the problem returns, once again, to our trespass on habitat and our refusal to acknowledge in a practical way that the other species who inhabit the planet with us have a right to living space.

Palm oil is part of the crop that diminishes the living space for orangutans.

It is advertised on the internet as 'the cheapest oil on earth'.

I submit that this depends on four factors:

- * There is no compensation to orangutans for taking possession of their territory, leaving them homeless

- * While the company involved may or may not have to buy the land, there is no specific payment (which, if justly levied, would be huge) for destroying the environment, in this case, the rainforest

- * There is no cost to the polluter for the amount of CO2 released into the atmosphere by the fires used to clear the area for planting

- * What is known as 'cheap labour' could equally well be described as 'exploitation of the local people'.

I further submit that whether it is exploitation can be measured against the profits derived from it

Malaysia and Indonesia receive US\$20 billion a year for the palm oil they produce.

Ten per cent of Malaysia is currently under palm oil plantings, while the exponential growth of the industry has induced Indonesia to plan to clear a further million hectares, a somewhat greater area, I understand, than the usual annual clearings.

This also means an increase in the continuous smoke from the fires made to burn off the felled rainforest, hardly an

asset to the climate change scenario.

While Australia imported 100,000,000kg of palm oil in the past year, we cannot know where it was used, because we have no labelling requirements for palm oil. It sails under the vegetable oil flag.

There are many possibilities, including margarine, ice cream, cooking applications, biscuits, toothpaste, lipstick, paint and more.

If we want to help save the orangutans we could ask government to require specific palm oil labelling so that we could choose to avoid supporting this industry which leads to the destruction of the orangutans.

Additionally, some companies use more sustainable practices in their

farming, so perhaps 'sustainably produced' could be added (or not - as the case may be).

Palm oil production establishes an irreversible trend: once palms are planted, they soak up all the water, dry up all the streams and, of course, remove forever the rich biodiversity of the forest.

The Australian Government has been co-operative in supporting three sanctuaries in Indonesia but of course zoos, by whatever name, cannot be the ultimate answer.

More hopeful is withdrawal by consumers of demand for the offending product, so let us hope that the government's co-operation extends to requiring labelling, so that we can have this choice.