

Palm Oil Everywhere: Putting Orangutans on the Brink

By Katherine Tweed

On any given morning in the Palangka Raya region of Indonesian Borneo, more than 600 young orangutans take to the trees and practice their climbing skills. These animals are not, however, learning the ropes from their mothers. They are all being rehabilitated by an army of human caretakers at Nyaru Menteng, the largest primate rescue operation on the planet.

Lone Droscher Nielsen started this project as part of the non-profit Borneo Orangutan Survival (BOS) in 1999 to rescue animals from the pet trade, but in recent years 90 percent of the apes that pour into the center are rescued from palm oil plantations, where rainforest is cut and burned before the crop is planted. She has taken up to 17 orphans in a single month from plantations.

Palm oil is an ingredient in countless household products, from vegetable oil and lipstick, to cookies and soap. Palm oil plantations are the leading cause of rainforest destruction in Indonesia and Malaysia, according to the United Nations Environment Program, leaving little habitat for orangutans that are already listed as endangered.



An area roughly the size of Maryland has already been converted to palm oil plantations, and that is expected to double by 2020. Palm oil is a cheap vegetable oil that has the bonus of being trans fat free, making it attractive to food companies.

There is some talk that palm oil could be sustainable, especially by using other unused agricultural land for crops instead of scorching rainforest, but if that is happening, the orangutans do not seem to have caught a break.

“There’s the argument that there’s enough cleared land for palm oil,” says Grainne McEntee, head of operations for BOS UK. “But there doesn’t seem to be any sign of the destruction abating.”

For BOS this means a constant stream of orangutans that need to be rehabilitated, or held and released as quickly as possible, depending on their health upon arrival. For every one that is rescued, McEntee says three more are estimated to have died.

The orangutans have at least one safe haven, the Mawas Reserve, one million acres of protection managed jointly by BOS and the Indonesian government. The animals are tracked for another few years after release into the wild. This year BOS hopes to return 100 orangutans to the wild, but the price tag is steep. At a cost of \$1500 per primate, McEntee says some of the animals may have to stay in the rehabilitation center longer.



“We’re slowing down the genocide of the orangutan,” she says, “but there’s still a lot of work.”

And while the destruction can seem far away, the demand is probably in your cabinets. Below is a list of common ingredients that contain palm oil or palm oil derivatives.

Palm Oil Names:

Sodium Laureth Sulphate (Can also be from coconut)
Sodium Lauryl Sulphates (can also be from ricinus oil)
Sodium dodecyl Sulphate (SDS or NaDS)
Palmate
Palm Oil Kernal
Palmitate

Cosmetics:

Elaeis Guineensis
Glyceryl Stearate
Stearic Acid

Chemicals With Palm Oil:

Steareth -2
Steareth -20
Sodium Lauryl Sulphate
Sodium lauryl sulfoacetate (coconut and/or palm)
Hydrated palm glycerides
Sodium isostearoyl lactylate (derived from vegetable stearic acid)
Cetyl palmitate and octyl palmitate (and anything with palmitate at the end)

