



# INDONESIA: FRYING *in* PALM OIL





*Primary tropical rainforest (West Sumatra province, Indonesia)*

*Photo: Sukhvinder*

**87 % of palm oil comes from Indonesia and Malaysia. Although Indonesia is also home to the second largest tropical forest in the world, with each new drop of palm oil, a part of the forest is lost forever.**

Photography exhibition

# INDONESIA: FRYING *in* PALM OIL

When you hear the name of the largest Indonesian island, Sumatra ...

... one imagines a dense rainforest teeming with orangutans and thousands of other species of exotic animals. Sadly, the reality is quite different today. **The virgin tropical paradise is being replaced at an alarming rate by oil palm plantations.** These vast plantations growing a crop intended mainly for export also take over land previously used to grow food for local consumption, thus threatening food self-sufficiency and the security of the local population.

**Palm oil is the most widely used vegetable oil in Europe.** Our shampoo, soap, margarine, biscuits, ice cream, chocolate and even crisps are all made with palm oil. It is also found in cleaning agents, animal food and, at a growing rate, even in motor fuels (palm oil is used to manufacture biodiesel).

**Our team of volunteers set off to Sumatra to record the impacts the cultivation of this monoculture has on the environment and the local community.** We talked with members of the local Suku Anak Dalam tribe, with palm plantation workers and small farmers growing oil palm, and with representatives of non-profit organisations and the government. We visited two provinces: Jambi, where oil palm already covers most of the arable land, and West Sumatra, where plantations are just now starting to expand. The photographs presented here document the situation in Sumatra today.





***We Won't Accept Hunger!*** is a joint project between the Glopolis analytical centre, the Italian, Greek and Dutch branches of ActionAid, the French organisation Peuples Solidaires and the Slovenian Ekvilib Institute. Activities in our country are offered as part of the Czechia against Poverty campaign, which sponsors the educational projects of many other Czech non-profit organisations (ADRA, ARPOK, Friends of the Earth, NaZemi, etc.). The main goal is to raise public awareness of the problem of hunger and possible solutions by hosting educational events run by volunteers (project ambassadors) throughout the Czech Republic.



## How did we arrive at the topic of palm oil?

One of the main subjects of the project is **global food security**. The deeper we delve into this matter, the more we discover that **our modern way of life is in fact linked to hunger and poverty in developing countries**. This is why our campaign is focussed on **responsible consumption**.

There are numerous examples of the way our consumption impacts life on the other side of the world. We therefore decided to concentrate on one specific example – a commodity that is one of the most problematic and, at the same time, one of the best hidden items in our shopping carts – **palm oil**.

*"We often fail to realise how our lifestyle is linked to events on the opposite end of the world. Palm oil is a perfect example of this interconnectivity. Without even being aware of it, the majority of us consume this product in various forms every day."*

Vendula Kratochvílová, project ambassador and member of the fact-finding mission to Indonesia



*Oil palm plantations (Jambi province, Sumatra)*

*Photo: Jana Harušťáková*

**Each year another 300,000 ha of oil palm plantations are added in Indonesia (an area roughly the twice of size of London).**




## Vanishing tropical forests

The sixth largest island in the world, Sumatra boasts an enormous natural bounty, especially one of the most fertile ecosystems in the world – the tropical rainforest. Sadly, more than half of this forest has been cut over the past 35 years. Each year an area corresponding to one-fifth of the Czech Republic (c. 1.5 million ha) disappears from Indonesia, half a million ha in Sumatra alone. This is one of the main reasons UNESCO placed part of the Sumatran forest on its List of World Heritage in Danger.

## Impact on climate change

Official estimates indicate that deforestation produces more than 20 % of all emissions of carbon dioxide and other carbon gases in the world. As a result, Indonesia has become the 3rd largest global producer of greenhouse gases (after the USA and China). Hence, Indonesia is a leading contributor to climate change.

## The bounty of Indonesian tropical forests



Highly diverse Sumatran fauna includes approximately 600 species of birds and 200 species of mammals, the best known of which are the orangutan, the Sumatran tiger and the rhinoceros. The populations of these animals are decreasing in step with the rainforest itself. Orangutans (“person of the forest” in Indonesian), which previously lived over the entire island, are found in only a small number of areas today (e.g. in the North Sumatra province). The loss of natural habitat often forces orangutans onto palm plantations in search of food. Owners, however, regard them as pests, and they are dealt with accordingly.

The biodiversity of the tropical forest is irreplaceable. It is estimated that today's tropical forest in Sumatra is home to around 10,000 species of plants, including 17 endemic species. One of them is the queen of Sumatran flora, *Rafflesia arnoldii*, which is found only on the two Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Borneo. The plant produces the largest flower on earth, a blossom renowned for its strong odour of rotting flesh. The flower can grow to a diameter of over one metre and a weight of around 10 kilograms.



Endangered "Man of the Forest" (North Sumatra province)

Photo: Michal Ortcykr

**Each day 6-12 orangutans are killed on palm plantations.**





The queen of Sumatran flora, *Rafflesia arnoldii* (West Sumatra)

Photo: Jana Kláková





## Oil palm

Oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) is a tropical plant in the Arecaceae family, which originates in equatorial Africa.

In 2000 palm oil became the most important and most traded vegetable oil in the world, and today approximately 50 million tons are produced each year. The leading exporter of palm oil is Indonesia (16 million tons in 2010). Indonesia overtook Malaysia in 2006, and together these two tropical countries produce nearly 90% of the palm oil on the global market. Other producers include Papua New Guinea, Benin, Ivory Coast and Honduras. The main importers are the EU, China and India.

*Oil palm with fruit (Jambi province, Sumatra)*

*Photo: Jana Klápková*



**Palm plantations cover an area of twelve million hectares (150 % of the total area of the Czech Republic).**

*Oil palm fruit*

*Photo: Jana Harušťáková*



## Green desert

Although to the uninformed observer they may resemble rainforests from a distance, in reality oil palm plantations are literally “green deserts”. Only a few species of plants able to tolerate enormous doses of chemical fertilisers and pesticides grow on the plantations. Of course, the pesticides used on plantations also have a negative impact on the quality of ground water. This environment does not provide adequate sustenance for wild animals, which are treated as pests by plantation owners.

Young palm trees are often planted directly in wetlands. Acting as enormous sponges (a single tree consumes up to 30 litres of water a day), oil palms change the moist soil of the tropical forest to a dry infertile plain. As a result of these drastic effects on the environment, many areas must deal with extreme conditions such as uncommonly hot weather, floods and landslides.

## What will remain once the plantations are gone?

Once the plantations are abandoned after 25-30 years, at which point the trees will have grown too tall to harvest, all that will remain is infertile clay soil. However, we didn't come across anyone who was thinking that far in advance. The head of the Department of Forests and Plantations in Dharmasraya (West Sumatra) told us that the land will be returned to local communities once it becomes infertile; however, no regeneration plans exist.

*Green desert (Jambi province, Sumatra)*

*Photo: Jana Harušťáková*





*A boy from the Suku Anak Dalam tribe (West Sumatra province)*

*Photo: Fatris Mohammad Faiz*







## The Suku Anak Dalam tribe

Suku Anak Dalam ("Children of the Forest") or Orang Rimba ("People of the Forest") is an aboriginal tribe from the province of Jambi and one of the last Sumatran tribes whose traditional way of life is fully dependant on the tropical forest. Tribe members live off forest fruit and wild animals, and they are able to collection forest honey from trees 90 metres tall. Some families have already acquired farming skills and grow cassava and other crops. The tribe continues to practise secret rituals which they will be pleased to describe for you; however, as an outsider you will never be able to take part in them. Various sacred plants such as the sentubung bush are used in the rituals. The bark of the bush is placed on the head of newborns during the ritual in which the local chief selects the proper name for the new member of the tribe. Names are of great importance to the Suku Anak Dalam tribe. When somebody dies, their name must never again be spoken, and the entire family must move to a different place (a tradition known as "melangun").

As a result of government programmes for the integration of the "Children of the Forest" into society and their diminishing environment due to the cutting of tropical forests, only a small part of the tribe's population lives the traditional lifestyle today. Of the approximately 200,000 members of the tribe, only 1,500 individuals retain the traditional way of life. These communities live primarily in the Jambi province and in the southern parts of the West Sumatra province.

## Children of the Forest on palm plantations

Many members of the Suku Anak Dalam are still reluctant to relinquish their nomadic way of life. Whereas members once moved between 75 and 100 km upon a death in the family, today the distance has been reduced to around 20 km, since the remaining pieces of forest no longer permit longer journeys. As a result of the shrinking forest, a large number of these nomads have been forced to settle directly on palm plantations, on the border between two worlds.

They were forced out of their home in the forest, but integration into regular society is unimaginable. Hence, they live for now in shelters made of wood and plastic, which they then abandon after a certain amount of time to look for a new home. The highly varied diet once provided by the tropical forest has been replaced by wild boar – virtually the only creatures that have survived on the plantations.

According to the head of the Department of Forests and Plantations in Dharmasraya (West Sumatra), the problem with the Suku Anak Dalam is the tribe's inability to adjust and settle down. Their nomadic life on the plantations apparently suits them. In reality, these people don't have much of a choice.



*Catch of the Suku Anak Dalam tribe (West Sumatra province)*

*Photo: Fatris Mohammad Faiz*





## The new home of the Children of the Forest

Without a permanent address or personal documents, the members of the Suku Anak Dalam tribe practically do not exist for the state apparatus and hence have no social, cultural or economic rights (e.g. the right to own land).

Those who do decide to settle down receive help from the Perkumpulan Peduli non-profit organisation. One such case involves the family of Ibu Marni, who has lived for two years now on the hillside between the tropical forest and a palm plantation. Perkumpulan Peduli helped her acquire several hectares to farm with her family. She is learning to grow crops such as cassava, aubergine, chilli, sugar cane and various fruits (bananas, papayas, etc.).

However, adapting to a new settled way of life is not easy. "We have no choice," they say.



*New home (West Sumatra province)*

*Photo: Vendula Kratochvílová*



*Ibu Marni*

*Photo: Vendula Kratochvílová*

Palm plantation workers (West Sumatra province)  
Photo: Jana Klápová





## **Plantations are not progress**

Many people think that foreign investment and demand for local products result in progress and new jobs for developing countries. And while palm oil boosts economic indicators such as the gross domestic product (GDP), for locals and the environment it is a disaster instead of a godsend. Those profiting from the ventures are large national and multinational corporations, which often transfer their earnings to countries with lower or even zero tax burdens ("tax havens"); as a result, the money disappears from the country without helping the local people. Another significant portion of profits is lost through corruption. "The Indonesian forests and their industrial use are a source of 'boundless' corruption," reports a representative of the chairman of the Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission.

## **Work on plantations**

Job creation on plantations is in fact minimal, and the positions are often filled by people from other Indonesian islands for lower wages and no rights. Plantation workers earn about one million Indonesian Rupiah a month, the equivalent of about 80 Euro, a wage that can hardly cover the basic living needs of the workers and their families.

The conditions for female plantation workers are usually even worse. We met with six women charged with collectively cultivating 50 ha of plantation a month. They work seven days a week to manage their tasks, earning only half a million Rupiah a month each.

*A small farmer harvesting oil palm fruit (Jambi province, Sumatra)*

*Photo: Jana Harušťáková*





## **The standing of small oil palm farmers**

In addition to the large companies farming more than half of Indonesian palm plantations, approximately 1.5 million small farmers (in a country with a population of around 250 million) also grow oil palm.

Some of them are part of the “nucleus-plasma” scheme, a system introduced by the Indonesian government to support small farmers in which each large company that plants a new oil palm plantation must set aside land for locals to farm. The small farmers usually receive an area of two hectares (known as one “kopling”). In return, they must sell their crops to the company that provided the land.

Small palm oil growers who are not part of this scheme but cultivate palm on their own land frequently do business under much worse conditions. They cannot sell their harvest directly to the processing companies, which only buy large amounts of crops. Each company therefore signs a contract with large traders to supply the required amount of crops. However, small farmers are often unable to sell their harvest to even these traders, who have similar contracts with other local traders to supply the contracted amounts. This situation has created a multi-level system of middlemen. Small farmers at the end of this chain are virtually powerless to negotiate prices, and as a result, their profits are low.

*Small rice farmer (West Sumatra province)*

*Photo: Jana Harušťáková*





## **Food self-sufficiency in Sumatra**

Upon crossing from Jambi into the province of West Sumatra, one encounters an entirely different scene. Never-ending oil palm plantations are replaced by rice fields and other basic crops for local consumption. As such, West Sumatra is a province that supplies food to the other Indonesian provinces that have already converted their arable land into plantations of export crops.

For example, Jambi is entirely dependant on supplies of food from West Sumatra or even imports from abroad. West Sumatra was hit by a large earthquake in 2009 and was unable to grow enough rice for export. Jambi was forced to rely on rice from Vietnam, which seriously undermined the food security of the local people.

Today, however, even the most fertile parts of West Sumatra are irreversibly changing into a “green desert” of palms (e.g. Dharmasraya and Pasaman). Where will food be grown for the local people?

## They're in your kitchen, too

Around 50 % of all packaged foods in supermarkets contain palm oil. It is used to produce food, cosmetics, detergents, animal food and, to an increasing extent, biofuels (specifically biodiesel).

The 18,197 tons of palm oil imported by the Czech Republic in 2012 required an area of approximately 4,500 ha to grow (i.e. about 4.5 m<sup>2</sup> of palm plantation per Czech resident). In reality, this area is much larger if all of the palm oil contained in imported products is included.

## Health impact

In addition to the consequences for the regions in which it is produced, palm oil also impacts our health. Like animal fats, palm oil also contains large amounts of saturated fatty acids, which increase the risk of obesity and vascular diseases – the leading causes of death in the Czech Republic.



Some of the products containing palm oil  
Photo: Jana Harušťáková



## How can we improve the situation?

Many people believe that individuals are powerless to influence the ways things work in the world and therefore bear no responsibility. But nothing could be further from the truth. **Never before in the history of mankind have people had such an influence on life at the opposite end of the world.**

But as the majority of us are unwitting actors in this process, we leave behind a rather shameful trail. Standing in the way of improvement are ignorance, apathy and even resignation. Only the prevailing feeling that we are powerless to change things keeps in motion a system whose main moving force (the public) remains inert. But there are in fact many ways to influence the system.

*"I am very grateful to everyone who is interested in and takes care of the community living around palm plantations. Traders and our government do not think about the impact these plantations have on people; their only concern is money. For this reason, please use less palm oil."*  
**Nursanti (teacher, Jambi province)**

### CONCRETE STEPS:

- ▶ Take an interest in the origin and ingredients of food and the other products you use daily. The decisions you make in the aisles of your supermarket are truly consequential.
- ▶ Inform others about what you've learned about palm oil. Your family and friends also have the right to know about the consequences of their everyday decisions.
- ▶ If you don't have enough information about a product, don't buy it. Demand that the producer provide this information. You have the right to any information that will help you decide whether your purchases are responsible.
- ▶ Don't be afraid to contact large companies that produce, import and sell palm oil or the products in which it is used. Inquire about the consequences of oil palm production on the local environment and community and the willingness of society to address this problem.
- ▶ Become involved in the civic initiatives of campaigns demanding the responsible production of palm oil and changes to laws concerning biofuels.

What is the connection  
between your purchases and  
the situation in Indonesia?



**Source:** Rainforest Action Network  
(<http://understory.ran.org/palmoilgraphic/>)

**Want to learn more?**  
**Get involved in the *We Won't Accept Hunger!* project.**

<http://glopolis.org/en/palm-oil/>, [info@glopolis.org](mailto:info@glopolis.org)



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Authors: Jana Klápková and Vendula Kratochvílová

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