

Opinion & Analysis

Palm oil greed could leave planet running on empty



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Unless the western consumer shouts 'stop' an environmental disaster threatens southeast Asia

LAST MONDAY over 40,000 participants completed the Flora Women's Mini Marathon in Dublin. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, an environmental disaster is unfolding that threatens not just southeast Asia, but also has profound implications for planetary climate.

The thread that connects these two seemingly unrelated events is palm oil, a key ingredient in Flora, as well as in many other household products, from Kit Kats and Cadbury's Dairy Milk to Pot Noodles and Crunchy Nut Cornflakes. Innocuously labelled as "vegetable oil", it is also used in a wide range of detergents, cosmetics, shampoos and soaps, including, as the name suggests, Palmolive.

A recent survey revealed that palm oil is being used in upwards of 40 per cent of top grocery brands. Globally, some 40 million tonnes of palm oil are now being produced annually, with three-quarters of this emanating from Malaysia and Indonesia.

Easy to grow and capable of yielding up to six times more per hectare than either soy or rapeseed, palm oil is widely seen as the new "wonder crop".

An area of pristine forest almost the size of the Republic of Ireland has been destroyed in

Borneo and Sumatra since 1990 to make way for plantations.

The price of this cheap, versatile and highly profitable oil is ecological wreckage on an epic scale. The UN Environment Programme reckons that 98 per cent of all forests in Indonesia will have been destroyed within 11 years. In a report on the destruction of the orang-utan, the programme's executive director Achim Steiner wrote that efforts to curtail illegal logging are being defeated not by poor farmers but instead by "what appear to be well-organised companies with heavy machinery and strong links to the global markets".

Astonishingly, the companies buying palm oil admit that widescale forest destruction to make way for vast new palm oil monoculture plantations in southeast Asia is causing tremendous environmental damage, yet barely 4 per cent of supply is certified as coming from sustainable sources.

Although an extremely cheap food ingredient, the sustainably sourced version of palm oil is around a third more expensive, and corporations are not going to voluntarily pay a cent over the odds for an ingredient just because it has been ethically produced. Unless, that is, public opinion in the West

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embarrasses them into doing so. Consumer goods giant Unilever (makers of Flora) pledged to switch to sustainable products last year, and was warmly praised by Prince Charles for its "determined and principled leadership". Unilever's decision appears to coincide closely with it having been targeted by Greenpeace for its role in the palm oil disaster. Unilever now plans to obtain all its palm oil from sustainable sources by 2015. However, it may be a moot point by then, given that there may be almost no intact Asian forests left to preserve by 2020.

The regions now under assault to feed the demand for palm oil are among the most biodiverse on earth; Borneo alone is home to

over 15,000 plant species, as well as 464 species of mammals and reptiles. Almost all of this extraordinary wealth is permanently lost with forest clearance.

The region is covered predominantly with peat forests, which are also vast carbon "sinks". As these are destroyed and drained, massive amounts of CO₂ are being released into the atmosphere. Even though these peat forests only cover 0.1 per cent of the earth's surface, burning them produces 4 per cent of total global emissions. In other words, they are contributing 40 times more emissions per hectare than normal land.

The UN has developed a scheme called reduced emissions from deforestation and degradation (REDD) that aims to channel billions of dollars to countries such as Indonesia in the form of carbon credits in exchange for their conserving and restoring forests.

However, palm oil is so profitable that it is threatening to destroy the initiative, according to the World Bank. It reckons that carbon credits would need to be worth over 20 dollars a tonne to compete with the revenues from palm oil. Right now, purchasing of carbon credits is voluntary, and firms will only pay a pittance, but REDD is

likely to be included in the critical UN climate deal in Copenhagen this December.

The 2007 King review for the UK government described climate change as "market failure on the greatest scale the world has seen . . . since the costs of greenhouse gases are not paid for by the creators of the emissions".

Nowhere is this economics of the madhouse more palpable than in witnessing how some of our biggest corporations and best known brands are prepared to literally set southeast Asia ablaze to maximise profits. Lest we forget, the crash of the global financial system has already illustrated where untrammelled greed and short-termism lands us.

To a biologist, "flora" denotes all the plant life in a particular region. There is a rich irony in it also being the name of a margarine whose production is hastening the elimination of the very diversity it signifies.

The theme of tomorrow's World Environment Day is: Your planet needs you! Why not mark the day by writing to Nestlé, Unilever, Tesco, L'Oreal or Cadbury's stating that you object to the use of palm oil that hasn't been certified as sustainably produced. Will they really listen? Hell, yes; the western consumer is the most powerful force on earth.