

Brittany Willingham

The Orangutan's Struggle to Survive the Palm Oil Industry

Snacks, cereals and soaps are things that many people purchase on a regular basis however, they take for granted where the ingredients for these products come from. Most consumers know that they are grown on a farm or created by scientists, taken to a factory, shipped to our neighborhood stores and carried into our homes. But what and where do these ingredients come from and who is making a sacrifice so that we can maintain our lifestyles? Some people may think of the workers who tend the plants that yield to us one of our most useful ingredients, oil. Sadly, people often overlook those who have made a different sacrifice, for example, Kesi. Kesi is a gentle, fun loving baby, who has become crippled physically and emotionally by watching the slaughter of her mother and losing her hand during the attack. What reason could there be for someone to attack a sweet and defenseless baby and who was prosecuted for this crime? The answer is no one and the reason is that Kesi is only 95 percent human. For many people, the five percent difference in her genes seems like enough justification to treat her cruelly and unjustly. Kesi is an orangutan (Kielburger).

Orangutans are known for their gentle nature. They are remarkably similar to humans in appearance, behavior, and genetic makeup, “shar[ing] more than 95% of the human gene pool” (Crush). In fact, the name orangutan means “People of the Forest” (Smith). Orangutans are solitary animals but they can be found together in the wild when a mother is carrying and nursing her young child. Malaysia and Indonesia are the only countries in which orangutans can be found in the wild. They are listed as an endangered species and their population continues to decrease. Logging, mining, and farming are major threats to this species. They are being further endangered by the growing palm oil industry. Malaysia and Indonesia, ironically, are also the top two palm oil producers in the world. “Palm oil is made from the fruit of the oil palm tree” (Zimmer) and is grown as a plantation crop. It is used in many common goods including

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candies, baked goods, soaps, and cosmetics (“How to avoid palm oil”). The demand for palm oil is increasing because it is less expensive than alternatives. Also, palm oil does not contain trans fat, which makes it appealing to the increasingly health conscious food industry (Brown 27).

The demand for palm oil calls for the creation of oil palm plantations. Plantation companies replace vast portions of rainforest in order to create oil palm plantations, stripping the animals of their natural habitat. Oil palm replaces the diverse organisms of the rainforest, trees, shrubs, and other foods that orangutans and other rainforest animals need to survive. It is estimated that over 12, 600 square miles of rainforest has been lost in Malaysia and Indonesia due to the palm oil industry (Brown 17). These companies often use careless and unregulated techniques to clear the land, with low cost and rapidness being their main focus. Oil palm grows easily on barren land but instead of using degraded land, old plantations, or deserted farm land, most oil palm plantations are established on freshly cleared rainforest. Companies do this because it cost more than they are willing to spend to rehabilitate barren land and they can make a profit by selling timber from the cut down trees. A technique that plantation companies use to quickly clear rainforest is setting forest fires. The fires are impossible to control and sometimes destroy larger portions of rainforest than originally intended.

Orangutans have become the victims of these ruthless clearing practices, many suffering cruel and painful deaths. “In 1997... almost 8, 000 orangutans were either burned to death or massacred as they tried to escape the forest fires... One plantation employee recounted that he [had seen] three orangutans dying in the flames” (Brown 19). In order to preserve its natural beauty and diversity, Malaysia and Indonesia have set aside areas for natural parks and wildlife reserves. The plants and animals in these areas are supposed to be protected by the government. Unfortunately, many of these parks have been partly destroyed by fires started by palm oil

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companies. In the Kutai National Park of East Kalimantan, a part of Indonesia, 95 percent of the forest was destroyed (Brown 21). The palm oil companies have begun to illegally clear trees inside of national parks with the help of the government. The government in East Kalimantan blocked the decision made by the National Ministry of Forests, which was meant to prohibit oil palm concessions on protected areas of the rainforest.

Oil palm plantations alter the structure of the rainforest and destroy food sources. It is estimated that in a 150 square mile section of land, "if more than half of that area is good forest with a fairly healthy population of orangutans, at least 400 to 500 orangutans will be displaced by its destruction" (Brown 17). Orangutans navigate the forest in search of food and mates. Plantations divide the rainforest, blocking the animals' paths and confining them to smaller territories. Crowding of these solitary animals has led to stress and reduced reproduction. Under these conditions, orangutans in search of food have begun to venture into villages and plantations. The desperate orangutans raid fruit markets and fields of oil palm shoots. The laws in these areas allow for the legal killing of orangutans in defense of property, so the people in these areas are taking action, costing hundreds of orangutans their lives.

In one case, villagers caught fourteen orangutans and after being relocated by the government, the orangutans were eventually killed (Brown 17). People eager to take advantage of the orangutans' despair are aided by the fact that the orangutans are being forced to move closer to human settlements. One of these forms of exploitation is the orangutan pet market. The orangutan pet market is very appealing, mostly because baby orangutans are so cute. To capture young orangutans, their mothers are shot right before them. The majority of these young children die from human disease, malnourishment, or falling to the forest floor after their mothers are slaughtered. Other adult orangutans are shot and taken for food (Smith).

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With so many factors threatening their existence, it is believed that orangutans will become the first great ape species to go extinct. “There are an estimated 60, 000 orangutans left the wild” (Crush). The orangutan population is rapidly decreasing. “Environmental groups estimate [that] the number of orangutans in Malaysia and Indonesia has fallen by half in the past 20 years . . . [and] more than 5, 000 orangutans have been lost every year since 2004” (Yoong). Many scientists fear that if action is not taken soon, “[orangutans] could become extinct in the wild as soon as 2011” (Kielburger). Scientist and conservationist propose many solutions that will help to protect the orangutans. These actions include implementing more effective law enforcement and prosecution to stop the hunting of orangutans for food and trade (Setka). Also, the government could require that companies establish their plantations on land that was degraded or cleared years ago (Brown 29). The damage of the palm oil industry could be greatly lessened if companies were persuaded to grow oil palm in a sustainable manner. Some of the key elements, applicable in this situation, that are required in sustainable agriculture are no destruction of natural rainforest and no burning for land clearing (Brown 29). The government could also help by doing more to enforce laws that make clear cutting illegal.

Some things that companies that use palm oil in their products could do to reduce the damage caused by the palm oil industry is to use better labeling practices so that consumers can make informed decisions about avoiding products that contain palm oil. Both producers and consumers can use palm oil alternatives, including corn and soy oil, therefore reducing the demand for palm oil and the need to replace the rainforest with oil palm plantations (Brown 28). It is a sad reality, but something as simple as human eating habits are fueling the extinction of our brilliant genetic relative, the orangutan. There may not be much politically that we can do to stop the actions of companies in Indonesia and Malaysia, but a small sacrifice from each of us

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can help to reduce the careless elimination of the rainforest and its inhabitants. Avoiding products containing palm oil can make a difference. Consumers should look out for food and cosmetic products that contain the following ingredients:

- Sodium Laureth Sulphate
- Sodium Lauryl Sulphates
- Sodium Dodecyl Sulphate
- Palmate
- Palm oil kernel
- Palmitate
- Elaeis Guineensis
- Glyceryl Stearate
- Stearic Acid

All of these are names used to describe palm oil on ingredient labels ("Palm Oil Action"). If we all make this simple change now, there may still be hope left for the future of wild orangutans.

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