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Check Your Ingredients! What You Need to Know About Palm Oil

By Nichole Dandrea



Where can we make positive changes and embrace eco-friendly ways? One food-related practice that's extremely important is the use of palm oil (which, by the way, isn't limited to just food — palm oil can be in cleaning products, skin care, hair care and vitamins).

What is palm oil? Palm oil is a vegetable oil that is derived from the palm fruit. The palm fruit is originally from Western Africa, however can

grow wherever heat and rainfall are abundant.

The palm oil industry is linked to major environmental issues such as deforestation, habitat degradation, climate change, animal cruelty and indigenous rights abuses (homes taken away from indigenous people in order to plant palm and, in some areas, palm oil plantations are linked to child slavery).

The [World Wildlife Fund](#) states that rainforest areas equivalent to 300 football fields are cleared

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every hour to make way for the palm oil industry. This destruction is leading many species to extinction. For example, the Sumatran elephant is losing its home due to palm oil plantations. It's becoming more and more difficult for the elephant families to find food and water, making it impossible to survive.

Scientists estimate that orangutans could become extinct from the wild in the next 20 years. With no rainforests available the orangutans are forced to live in palm plantations where they are viewed as an annoyance and either shot or captured, babies ripped away from their moms, and sold illegally to the wildlife trade. It is estimated that the Sumatran tiger will be extinct within the next three years, again, due to palm oil.

Can you imagine a world without elephants, tigers or orangutans?

Palm Oil is not only a problem for the local rainforests. When rainforests are cleared, a significant amount of carbon pollution is released, making palm oil a major driver of human induced climate change. (source, [Rainforest Action Network](#))

So why is there such a high demand for palm oil? Big companies love the versatility of palm oil because it's inexpensive, shelf stable and can be used in everything from food to cosmetics to household cleaners, making it a very profitable ingredient. When research started to emerge about the negative effects of trans fats in our food, companies quickly jumped on board to remove those trans fats. What did they replace it

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with? Yes, you guessed it, palm oil. It's currently found in roughly half the packaged products sold in US grocery stores, including snack foods like ice cream, cookies, crackers, chocolate products, instant noodles, peanut butter, cereals, doughnuts and potato chips. (source, [Rainforest Action Network](#))

What about sustainable palm oil? There is palm oil that is certified by the [Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil](#) (RSPO) who "enforces" criteria and policies to help reduce the negative impacts of palm oil plantations on the environment, animals and communities. There is a set of environmental and social criteria, created by RSPO, which companies should comply with in order to produce Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO).

When they are properly applied, these criteria can help to minimize negative impacts. You can read more about their principles and criteria [here](#). However, the RSPO's certification

provides no guarantee of palm oil produced without deforestation, species extinction, or human rights abuses and, unfortunately, these companies are often not following sustainable practices. Bottom line — avoid all products with any derivative of palm oil on their ingredient label.

What can you do about this environmental, animal welfare and human crisis? Read ingredients. If it says palm oil (and it's not organic or CSPO), put it back on the shelf. Your dollar has more power than you know. By not purchasing products made with palm oil, you're committing to preserve the rainforest and the wildlife that inhabits it, fighting climate change and being a voice for indigenous people who are treated unfairly on these plantations. By not purchasing a product with palm oil you're also committing to not support a company who's financial interests overpower the interest of the planet and its species (including you).

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If you'd like to take further action, visit the [Rainforest Action Network](#) to see how you can be more involved. Also, be sure to check out the [Snack Food 20](#) to see how your favorite companies score on responsibility and integrity.

If you want to view two impactful videos on the issue, see below. Warning: keep tissues by your side.

[Palm Oil: How Our Consumer Choices Affect Wildlife](#)
[Orangutan Asks Girl For Help In Sign Language](#)

Please share and keep the conversation going. Let us know your thoughts and what you find in your food ingredients, household cleaners and body care products.



About the author...

Nichole Dandrea is the creator of Purely Planted and her goal is to help people get over the hump of getting stuck while trying to eat well and feel nourished on a plant-based diet. She customizes a plan for each individual based on what they enjoy eating and their lifestyle. She believes plants have the power to heal hundreds of ailments, most of which stem from inflammation caused by inflammatory foods (think dairy, sugar and meat) and her website gives the guidance to do this. [Check out her website.](#)