Oil palm research in context: Identifying the need for biodiversity assessment

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Oil palm (Elaeis guineensis) cultivation has expanded dramatically in recent decades and is frequently cited as a major threat to tropical biodiversity. This is because oil palm is grown in lowland tropical regions and so impacts on the most biodiverse terrestrial habitats: tropical rainforests. Analysis of the published literature by scientists led by Edgar Turner at the University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge has revealed significant changes in the focus of oil palm research over the last 30 years. The findings are published in *PLoS ONE* on February 13.

Recent years have seen a broadening in the scope of the research with a slight increase in research focusing on the environment and a dramatic increase in research focusing on biofuel. Despite this, hardly any oil palm publications focused on biodiversity and species conservation. Of these publications, the majority were related to mammals and birds. Although these larger animals are important flagships for the state of the tropical environment, they are not good indicators of oil palm biodiversity. The vast majority of the species worldwide are insects and it is they that carry out the lion's share of the ecosystem function.

Head of the Insect Ecology Research Group, Dr William Foster said: "Much more research must be carried out to determine the impacts of habitat conversion on insect biodiversity. We need to move on from merely cataloguing biodiversity impacts, to understanding how all aspects of ecosystem services are affected by agricultural expansion."

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