

Sustainable crop certification helps people and nature, but it could do more to help world's poorest farmers

May 14 2018

Sustainable crop certification schemes could be missing the poorest farmers who are most in need of their benefits, according to a new Atlas Award-winning paper in *Biological Conservation*.

In their study, a team of researchers from the UK and the US mapped one million of the world's commodity [crops](#), including banana, cocoa, coffee, and tea, showing where they are certified. They suggest that if schemes developed stronger standards and targeted poor areas more effectively, they could make a bigger impact – if they can also increase consumer demand for certified products.

Their work has been selected by an [international scientific committee](#) to receive this month's Atlas Award, selected from 10 nominations that demonstrate the potential impact on people's lives around the world. The winning research is presented alongside interviews, expert opinions, multimedia and much more on the Atlas website.

"A [certification](#) standard can give you, as a consumer, some assurance that what you're buying has been produced in a way that is good for the environment and good for the farmers," said Dr. Tayleur, lead author of the study from the University of Cambridge, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and BirdLife International. "But it looks as though some of the world's poorest farmers are currently missing out on the benefits of certification."

Crop certification programs, such as Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance, set out standards farmers must meet in terms of protecting the environment, such as reducing water use and protecting biodiversity. The schemes also provide many benefits to the farmers, who are often small-holders. They can offer a price premium and improve the farmers' access to the market. Some focus on encouraging good agricultural practices that improve yields and profits.

The number of certification schemes has exploded over the last decade, yet we know little about where they operate and whether they are best serving farmers and the environment in those locations.

The team collected data from different certification schemes to map the farms, producing the first global map of commodity crop certification. The results showed that only about four percent of all crop growing areas had some certification in the region. Most of the certification was found in tropical areas; while these areas are well targeted to protect biodiversity, they are not the areas most in need of poverty alleviation.

"Certification tends to operate in areas that are really important for biodiversity, so that's great news," said Dr. Tayleur. "But we also found that certification wasn't operating in the poorest [areas](#); it seemed to be missing some of those farmers that might benefit most from the livelihood aspects of certification."

Dr. Tayleur and her colleagues suggest that strengthening the certification standards could help improve this, by targeting the right issues within the standards, such as biodiversity, depending on where the crops are located. The standards should also be made more accessible to farmers; certification is often expensive and complex. The researchers believe there is an opportunity for expansion, if it's done strategically to address the gaps identified in the research.

There is one big challenge, which the programs will have to address if any of these solutions are to work: supply of certified products currently tends to outstrip demand. While there has been a notable increase in consumer awareness of sustainability issues, the certification schemes will only have a big impact if shoppers are demanding certified sustainable products.

Dr. Tayleur is now working with some of the farmers who are falling through the gaps in certification – those growing cocoa in Sierra Leone and Liberia. "Currently these farmers are a long way off being able to meet the standards of an international certification scheme, so we're developing rainforest-friendly cocoa guidelines that are relevant to this local context and which are achievable by the [local farmers](#)."

More information: Catherine Tayleur et al. Where are commodity crops certified, and what does it mean for conservation and poverty alleviation?, *Biological Conservation* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.biocon.2017.09.024](#)

Provided by Elsevier

Citation: Sustainable crop certification helps people and nature, but it could do more to help world's poorest farmers (2018, May 14) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-05-sustainable-crop-certification-people-nature.html>

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