

# Study suggests palm oil cultivation in Africa could further endanger primates

August 14 2018, by Bob Yirka

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An international team of researchers has found that there are few areas

where palm oil cultivation could be undertaken in Africa that would not cause harm to native primates. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the group describes their study of data pertaining to the suitability of palm oil cultivation and primate vulnerability in Africa, and what they found.

In recent years, [palm oil](#) has become more valuable. In addition to being used as a food additive (it is also in such products as cosmetics and soaps) it has now become an important ingredient in many biofuels. Palm oil comes, quite naturally, from the oil palm tree, which is native to West Africa. But it was migrated to Malaysia and Indonesia many years ago, and those two countries are now the main exporters of the oil. But that is likely to change, because land for growing the trees has become scarce in those countries. For that reason, producers have begun to take a serious look at establishing plantations in Africa. In this new effort, the researchers suggest that doing so will cause even more problems for at-risk native primate populations. The problem is that many of the primates living in Africa, inhabit areas that are most suitable for palm oil cultivation.

To learn more about the possible impact of palm oil cultivation in Africa, the researchers pulled statistics from databases containing information on palm oil production and primate vulnerability in Africa—comparing the two showed that there are very few places in Africa where palm oil could be cultivated without harming primates (it amounted to just 0.13 million hectares). One of the few exceptions was one part of Madagascar. They further note that there are almost 200 primate species living in Africa, and many of them are living in areas of overlap—land suitable for both primates and oil palm cultivation. They suggest that destroying habitat for the sake of palm oil cultivation would further endanger the primates living there. They further suggest that changes be made to palm oil [cultivation](#) practices to reduce the impact on the local environment. They also note that consumers can help by

refusing to buy products that contain palm oil produced in ways that harm [primates](#).

**More information:** Giovanni Strona et al. Small room for compromise between oil palm cultivation and primate conservation in Africa, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1804775115](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804775115)

### **Abstract**

Despite growing awareness about its detrimental effects on tropical biodiversity, land conversion to oil palm continues to increase rapidly as a consequence of global demand, profitability, and the income opportunity it offers to producing countries. Although most industrial oil palm plantations are located in Southeast Asia, it is argued that much of their future expansion will occur in Africa. We assessed how this could affect the continent's primates by combining information on oil palm suitability and current land use with primate distribution, diversity, and vulnerability. We also quantified the potential impact of large-scale oil palm cultivation on primates in terms of range loss under different expansion scenarios taking into account future demand, oil palm suitability, human accessibility, carbon stock, and primate vulnerability. We found a high overlap between areas of high oil palm suitability and areas of high conservation priority for primates. Overall, we found only a few small areas where oil palm could be cultivated in Africa with a low impact on primates (3.3 Mha, including all areas suitable for oil palm). These results warn that, consistent with the dramatic effects of palm oil cultivation on biodiversity in Southeast Asia, reconciling a large-scale development of oil palm in Africa with primate conservation will be a great challenge.

Citation: Study suggests palm oil cultivation in Africa could further endanger primates (2018, August 14) retrieved 16 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-08-palm-oil-cultivation-africa-endanger.html>

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