

Sustainable choices on palm oil must be easier for consumers, says new study

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Consumer goods companies and retailers need to be upfront about where

palm oil in their products comes from to relieve consumers of the burden of making sustainable choices.

That is a key finding of new research from the University of Cambridge (UK). It publishes today in *Environmental Research Letters*.

Palm oil production causes deforestation, [greenhouse gas emissions](#) from peatland conversion, and biodiversity loss, but it is found in many products, often unbeknownst to consumers. It is a common ingredient in foods, body products, detergents, and biofuels.

Dr. Rosemary Ostfeld, from the University of Cambridge, is the study's lead author. She said: "The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) has made efforts to improve the sustainability of [palm](#) oil production by creating an environmental certification system for palm oil.

"But currently only 19 percent of palm oil is RSPO-certified. This means the majority that finds its way into products people buy daily is still produced using conventional practices.

"We wanted to find out if consumers were actively seeking to make a sustainable choice about palm oil. We also explored what extra efforts governments could make to ensure sustainable palm oil consumption."

The researchers surveyed 1,695 British consumers through the market research company YouGov. Respondents were asked about their awareness of palm oil and its [environmental impact](#); their recognition of 'ecolabels' such as Fairtrade, the Soil Association, and RSPO; and which ecolabelled products they included in their weekly household shopping.

They found UK consumer awareness of palm oil was high (77 percent), with 41 percent of those aware of it viewing it as 'environmentally unfriendly'. Yet, almost no consumers were aware of the RSPO label

that showed a product contained sustainably-produced palm oil.

"In terms of label recognition versus action, 82 percent of people recognised the Fairtrade label, but only 29 percent actively buy Fairtrade products," said Dr. Ostfeld.

"Only five percent recognised the RSPO label—the same as a fictional label we put into the survey as a control. Of that small number, only one percent said they actively include products with the label in their shopping."

The low recognition of the RSPO label could be due to the scarcity of its use by consumer goods companies and retailers.

Dr. Ostfeld suggested: "This may be due in part to reluctance to draw attention to their use of palm oil, or it may be because they fall short of the 95 percent physical certified palm oil content that used to be needed to use the label.

"Either way, we found that relying on consumers to consciously and regularly include certified products in their shopping has limitations. Our results show that even when consumer awareness of an ecolabel is high, action is not guaranteed."

To address this problem, the researchers put forward several policy recommendations.

Dr. Ostfeld explained: "Palm oil is more efficient to produce than other [vegetable oils](#) and plays a vital role in the livelihoods of millions of people, so banning it is not plausible. Instead, the goal should be to encourage [sustainable palm oil](#) production.

"We recommend governments require consumer goods companies and

retailers to buy identity-preserved certified palm oil, which can be traced back to the individual plantation. If national targets must be met with identity-preserved certified palm oil, demand for it will increase. It will also enable unsustainable practices to be uncovered more easily.

"Companies should also publicly disclose their palm oil suppliers. This will help [consumers](#) know if they're sourcing their palm oil from growers who use best practices.

"We believe these measures could promote a more rapid move towards sustainable [palm oil](#) consumption, and higher levels of accountability throughout the supply chain."

More information: 'Peeling back the label - Exploring sustainable palm oil ecolabelling and consumption in the United Kingdom' *Environmental Research Letters* (2019). [DOI: 10.1088/1748-9326/aaf0e4](https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/aaf0e4)

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