

More than half of cocoa from the world's largest producer cannot be traced to its origin

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Published today in the journal *Environmental Research Letters*, a new study investigates the transparency and traceability of cocoa supply chains in Côte d'Ivoire, the world's largest cocoa producer. The results

show that less than 45% of cocoa from Côte d'Ivoire can be traced back to the first buyer. The remaining 55% cannot, either because it is indirectly sourced by traders from intermediaries or exported by traders that disclose no information about their suppliers.

In Côte d'Ivoire, [cocoa](#) accounts for over one third of the national export revenue. However, this industry drives [deforestation](#) due to weak enforcement of land use regulations, among other factors. Côte d'Ivoire has lost 80% of its [forest cover](#) in the past 60 years. The study shows that over 2000–2019 almost half of the deforestation and forest degradation in the country was due to cocoa, replacing each year an area larger than New York City.

In response to [public pressure](#), most chocolate companies have made some investment in tracing the origins of their cocoa supplies, committing to zero-deforestation policies. However, the success of these initiatives is very limited. There is often a breakdown of records between the cocoa production and its transportation. This makes it difficult to assess where companies source their cocoa from and what progress they are making toward their zero deforestation pledges.

Cécile Renier, lead author of the study, says, "As Easter approaches, the world's largest chocolate consumer, the European Union, is nearing the peak of its chocolate season. It is one of the busiest times of year for the chocolate industry, which increasingly sells its products to consumers as 'ethical' or 'sustainable.' But given the extremely limited tracing in the industry, consumers are not being shown the full picture about where their chocolate comes from, and the serious sustainability issues attached to it."

Led by researchers from Earth and Life Institute at UCLouvain, Belgium, the new study shows that high rates of untraced cocoa sourcing can be found along the border with Liberia, where forests are under

threat by cocoa expansion from Côte d'Ivoire. In these regions, 80–100% of exported cocoa is not traceable to its first buyer—let alone to its origin farm. This falls short of the forthcoming requirements under the EU due-diligence legislation, cloaking the sustainability risks associated with cocoa products.

As part of the Trase initiative, the research team utilized publicly available datasets for Côte d'Ivoire's 2019 cocoa exports and land use to link cocoa production and its associated deforestation to specific companies and markets. The study is one of the first to lift the opacity surrounding the cocoa sector in West Africa, showing that it is possible to trace at least some of the cocoa exports, and attribute impacts such as deforestation to specific traders and importing countries.

"A lack of transparency and traceability within the industry means that this deforestation is going unchecked and unaccounted for. Even traders who disclose their supplying cooperatives can greatly strengthen their level of transparency: the disclosed data is incomplete, irregular, non-standardized or never updated," says Renier.

"Above all, companies must go beyond the traceability of their own supply chains. Much greater means are needed to enforce land use policies and landscape initiatives. Coupled with transparent national traceability systems and robust deforestation monitoring, this would ensure effective forest conservation, and achieve true sustainability in the cocoa supply chain."

More information: Cécile Renier et al, Transparency, traceability and deforestation in the Ivorian cocoa supply chain, *Environmental Research Letters* (2023). [DOI: 10.1088/1748-9326/acad8e](https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/acad8e)

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