

Demand for coffee can create ecological, economic rift with poorer nations

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

The explosion in worldwide coffee consumption in the past two decades has generally not benefitted farmers of coffee beans in poorer nations along the equator.

A University of Kansas (KU) researcher studying trade and globalization has found that the shift to "technified" [coffee](#) production in the 1970s and 1980s has created harsher economic and ecological consequences for heavy coffee-producing nations, such as Honduras, Colombia, Guatemala, Brazil, Vietnam and Ethiopia.

"Historically, coffee has been exploited by the West in various ways, because it's consumed in rich countries, and grown in poor ones," said Alexander Myers, a KU doctoral candidate in sociology.

Myers will present his study, "Trading in Crisis: Coffee, Ecological Rift, and Ecologically Unequal Exchange," at the 110th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA). The paper examines how the shift to technified coffee for mass production and to meet greater demand

hurt peasant [farmers](#) of those countries and had a major ecological influence there, especially with the amount of water required for the crops.

Myers said the shift to technified coffee production changed the process to look more like traditional large wheat or soybean farms in the United States as opposed to allowing coffee plants to grow in smaller shaded areas. The latter process used much less water, for example, and it allowed farmers to diversify their crops and use their land to plant other crops as well.

Technified production requires farmers to exclusively grow coffee.

"Especially these peasant farmers who maybe have a small plot of land, they rely almost exclusively on coffee sales to sustain themselves," Myers said.

Major drops in commodities prices of [coffee beans](#) to around \$0.50 per pound in 2001 nearly wiped out economies of those nations, for example.

"That really hit the famers hard, and it caused a lot of these family farms that have historically relied on coffee to keep themselves afloat," Myers said.

The technification of [coffee production](#) also required a new type of coffee bean to grow effectively, but the process also required much more water to produce. Some ecological researchers have estimated the average cup of coffee takes 140 liters of water to grow.

"It's very taxing environmentally," Myers said.

The fair trade movement in the past two decades has helped to offset somewhat both the economic and ecological changes, especially for poorer farmers in developing countries. Myers said such movements could help raise awareness especially among coffee drinkers in Western nations.

"What we do matters. The choices that we make, the products that we buy have an impact on somebody," he said. "Sometimes it's a good impact. Sometimes it's negligible or negative. But they do have impacts, so just trying to keep that in mind is important, especially in researching what is behind these consumption choices."

Provided by University of Kansas

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