

Global Environmental Politics- Policy Paper

A push for sustainable Palm Oil in the wake of Brexit:

'Palm Oil has been and continues to be a major driver of deforestation of some of the world's most biodiverse forests' (WWF, 2018). With the overconsumption of the many products that carry Palm Oil, the UK, like many other major importing countries, has contributed to the shocking and disastrous effects of deforestation which continues at an alarmingly fast rate. In 2018, Greenpeace began to commission the EU Parliament to re-address the issues of deforestation and called for policy changes revolving around the EU's consumption of biofuels and overconsumption of meat and dairy that causes forest degradation (Greenpeace, 2018). As of currently (Spring 2019), the EU has now drawn up an action plan and is attempting to enforce a 'ban on EU biofuels using Palm Oil, which have driven deforestation and contributed to the loss of 150,000 orangutans in Indonesia since 2002' (The Guardian, 2018). In the wake of Brexit and evolving possible trade deals, this begs the question, will the United Kingdom follow in the footsteps of the EU Parliament in the crucial race to save the rainforests? This policy paper argues for the UK Parliament to re-examine their post Brexit trade deals in the light of protecting and minimising forest degradation. This paper will call for policies affecting the use of Palm Oil as a majorly imported product and will challenge the Nation's overconsumption of unsustainable materials that are being harvested in their millions, contributing to the overarching environmental chaos that we face today and will face more predominantly in the future.

Palm Oil itself is an edible vegetable oil that comes from the squeezing or crushing of the fruit from oil palm trees. As a substance it holds many useful properties that allows it to function as a key resource in our everyday lives. It is used as spreads as Palm Oil can remain semi-solid at room temperature. It is oxidation resistant so gives products a longer shelf life. It remains stable at high temperatures so allows fried products to have their appealing properties; crunchy and crispy textures. It is odourless and colourless so does not affect the smell and taste of foods (WWF, 2018). It is because of its inherent substantial and useful properties that Palm Oil has made its way into many of the products that an average UK citizen may use everyday. It is found in food items such as packaged bread, ice cream, pizza dough, instant noodles, margarine and chocolate. It is also in household appliances such as detergents and in many beauty and hygienic products such as lipstick, shampoo and soap (WWF, 2018). In fact it is in nearly 50% of the products found in UK supermarkets (WWF, 2018). The consumption of Palm Oil seems to be in a never-ending cycle, but it's outstanding qualities does not mean that is

harmless and as a country, we cannot continue at this rate of Palm Oil consumption without creating disastrous environmental effects.

The overconsumption of palm oil and biofuel is notorious in creating a crisis for the rainforests and global warming. In 2018, a Greenpeace investigation found that 25 of the biggest palm oil producers had trade links with 17 major food and cosmetic brands. These brands which included some of the UK's biggest businesses were found to be working with the largest palm oil trader, Wilmar International. These brands included, Nestle, Colgate-Palmolive, Johnson & Johnson, Unilever (Dove brand), Kelloggs, Mondelez (Cadbury), Mars, and Proctor and Gamble (Head & Shoulders brand) (Greenpeace, 2018). Greenpeace's 'The Final Countdown' report found that in Papua, one of the world's most bio-diverse regions, had only recently been used for Palm Oil production and yet has experienced 40% of deforestation within their rainforests in such a short amount of time. At the heart of trade deals between the UK and the EU, Indonesia was found to have lost around 24 million hectares of rainforest to deforestation for palm oil use between 1990 and 2015 (The Final Countdown, Greenpeace, 2018). The use of deforestation to produce palm oil is not only affecting the greenhouse gases in our atmosphere and producing a high rate of carbon emissions, but is also causing the destruction of many habitats, putting our wildlife at risk and may become the cause of endangered or extinct species. The Final Countdown report shockingly found that globally '193 Critically Endangered, Threatened, and Vulnerable species are threatened by palm oil production' (The Final Countdown, Greenpeace, 2018). Palm Oil is essentially one of the biggest drawbacks in protecting the biodiversity and ecosystems of the planet and yet is the favourable trade for businesses, organisations and countries. The fact is clear, palm oil is and will continue to be harmful and dangerous to the future of our planet. If the United Kingdom as a country wishes to pursue in sustainable development and make climate change a major priority in policy making as we claim to do so, then the consumption of this dangerous palm oil must be re-examined.

Over 30 percent of the planet's land area is covered by forests (Food and Agricultural Organisation, 2012). Forests are crucial to the sustainability and biodiversity of our ecosystem. Without, the earth would not be able to sustain and support life, making the issue of deforestation a devastatingly alarming one. This is because forests are essential in providing a balance in our ecosystem as well as many other goods. 'They store carbon, protect watersheds, regulate water flows, generate rainfall, contribute to maintaining stable climates and other natural systems' (Stevenson, 2018, p.183) as well as 'sustaining livelihoods, providing jobs and shelter, and generating commodities for trade' (Stevenson, 2018, p.183). Although these uses for forests are vital for the

well-being of the planet, it also means that forests are regularly exposed to exploitation because of their important goods. In fact research shows that over the past 5,000 years, an estimated 1.8 billion hectares of forest has been cleared for the main purpose of human and economic development (Stevenson, 2018, p.184). This is what has made the normal use of trees for the purposes shared above into the problem of deforestation that we now face today. In a report published by the Food and Agricultural Organisation, research shows the importance of forests as 'carbon sinks.' The report found that as a carbon sink, the forests in the world absorb around 2 billion tonnes of Carbon Dioxide every year. However the report also found that deforestation is the second leading cause of climate change after the burning of fossil fuels and that it is responsible for nearly 20 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions (Food and Agricultural Organisation, 2018). Forests are also a vital ingredient in producing alternative fuels and solutions for tackling climate change; 'overall forests supply about 40 percent global renewable energy in the form of woodfuel' (Food and Agricultural Organisation, 2018). These are usually sustainably harvested as well and are carefully managed to not contribute to deforestation. Furthermore the research also found that forests maintain many of the fresh watersheds in the world, 230 of the major watersheds, which in a world facing more droughts and water scarcity, this is another pushing point in the importance of protecting the world's forests. These forests are responsible for providing a staggering 3/4s of the worlds accessible fresh water (Food and Agricultural Organisation, 2018); a statistic that if altered would lead to major world problems including water conflict.

Since the scale of deforestation is continuously rising, many institutions, countries and organisations are becoming enlightened of just how disastrous the problem can become. As a result, initiatives and schemes over the past 20 years have begun to be implemented across the global market in the hope that trade can be regulated to minimise the destruction of the world's forests and namely the rainforests. The UK government has partaken in and produced many of these schemes but within the instability of Brexit negotiations, it is crucial now more than ever that the problems of deforestation and overconsumption becomes a priority in negotiating trade deals. In 2007, the UN set out four global objectives in the treatment of the forests. These include, 'reverse the loss of forest cover worldwide through sustainable forest management, enhance forest-based economic, social and environmental benefits, increase significantly the area of protected forests worldwide (and) reverse the decline in official development assistance for sustainable forest management' (UN, 2007). Although promising, without the cooperation of the countries involved and the commitment from major businesses to become more sustainable in their production of goods and trade deals, progress can only be slow through schemes such as this. Similarly, in 1993, the WWF created the FSC stamps (the Forest Stewardship Council).

These act as global eco-labels on products where the companies and brands have promised that their goods came from sustainably managed environments and had not partaken in the issue of deforestation. This method was designed to encourage the consumer to buy sustainably as well as encourage more businesses to re-trace their production lines. Unfortunately however as of current day, this scheme only accounts for 15 percent of the global forests and within that, only 1.5 percent of tropical and subtropical forests, where the height of deforestation occurs (Stevenson, 2018).

In 2012, the UK government made its first steps in recognising palm oil as a leading factor in the problem of deforestation and a commitment was made for 100% of palm oil within the UK to be sourced sustainably and to not be harmful to the environment (WWF, 2018). WWF followed up these claims and found that in 2016, 78% of all palm oil used in within the UK followed this commitment. Although this is still impressive, more can be done to reach the full 100% mark and there is a call for the Government to act now. Initiatives such as the UN's global objectives, the FSC eco-labels and the potential market built on the incentives of schemes such as REDD+, all still require government intervention if they are to make any real impact. The UK government has the power to implement policies not only directly involving organisations tackling deforestation and climate change but also the power to control imports of palm oil within the UK and the businesses and brands that rely heavily on a production line that risks the future and well-being of the planet. Importantly, it is crucial for this government to recognise that power also lies in the hands of the consumer; 'consumer sovereignty' (Stevenson, 2018, p.216). Schemes such as the FSC eco-labels redirects the problem and relies on the buyer's responsibility as well. It encourages the consumer to also address and think about the production of the goods they are buying. Therefore, it is important for the government to understand that the UK has a overconsumption problem in many areas but perhaps most profoundly with palm oil. Is it possible to use alternatives to palm oil in the products that we use everyday? If so, will this be an efficient choice for businesses and brands to still produce their products and make sufficient profit? And finally, will the consumer still buy a product if it is either taxed or uses alternatives that is unfamiliar to the norm? These are the questions that the government needs to address.

As of currently, the problem of overconsumption is a derivative leading factor in environmental degradation. It is fact that our lifestyles cannot sustainably support the planet and if continued will damage the ecosystem beyond repair. We allow the global market and businesses to sell us a false ideology everyday which encourages us to indulge in luxury consumption. It is this harmful materialistic nature that the UK government needs to recognise as an area of potential intervention. In fact on two

occasions the UK has profoundly done just this. In 1992 at the Earth Summit Rio, the UK was amongst those who began to discuss the importance of 'sustainable consumption and production' (Stevenson, 2018 p.206). This was the creation of the declaration known as 'Principle 8' which called states to 'reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and promote appropriate demographic policies' (UN,1992). A decade in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development the 'Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development' (Stevenson, 2018, p.207) re-address the problems and called again for states to tackle the problems of overconsumption. Nearly 20 years later, although many solutions and schemes has taken place, significant problems such as the UK's palm oil consumption still stand out. The UK has pledged many times to regulate the production of goods and call for all imports to be sustainably produced however as the evidence in this policy paper has shown us, not enough has been done. This is why in the turmoil of Brexit negotiations it is important that as a country and a government the UK does not forget their allegiances towards sustainable development and work to follow in the EU's footsteps (regardless of Brexit outcomes) in preventing unsustainable palm oil trade.

The UK is currently in the position to pave a new way in trading deals and controlling this country's imports and exports within the global market. Despite the problems and evolving trade negotiations within a time of Brexit, the opportunity to push for a country to be built on sustainable production cannot be missed. Climate change is evidential and very real and the UK government has the power to make their substantial mark in saving the planet. This is why this paper is calling for a complete breakdown of palm oil trade. As of this moment, alternative fuels does not seem to be an efficient solution right now (although it may well be in the near future) so policies to reduce the use of unsustainable palm oil to a minimum is the best and most pressing solution. The UK must work towards producing a 100% mark for sustainable palm oil to come into this country. This means the UK should not be deterred from playing their part because of the pressing demand for safe and easy trading negotiations. In 2018 Greenpeace researchers claimed that within post brexit talks, 'Malaysia reportedly threatened to cancel defence contracts worth £5bn if the UK backed a palm oil ban in Brussels' (The Guardian, 2018). This puts sustainable palm oil consumption down to a matter of priorities. The UK government must decide what is more important; a temporary and minimal security blanket of safe trading deals or the chance to save the world's forests and the impending disaster of climate change before it's too late. This paper is not calling for a complete ban on palm oil but asks for the Government to prioritise sustainable development during Brexit negotiations. The UK must push for 100% sustainable palm production. Until this, a policy should be implemented in taxing and putting trading tariffs on all unsustainable palm oil trade within this country. Businesses

must be taxed as well as the consumers within the buying price. This will pressurise palm oil using companies to retrace their steps and find alternative solutions and will also encourage the buyer to do the same.

Word Count= 2530 words

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