

113 學年度招生試題（英譯中）

The Other Oil Crisis

In southwestern Gabon, the old-growth forest stretches hundreds of miles. One January morning I disembark from a narrow boat on the shore of the Ngounié River with a few employees of Olam, a Singapore-based agri-business company. Following elephant tracks, we pass towering, ancient trees, chimpanzee nests, piles of day-old gorilla dung. Monkeys scamper overhead. A young Olam ranger yanks off his boots and climbs barefoot up a trunk, returning with handfuls of pink, plumlike fruits.

Wandering farther we find wild mangoes, kola nuts, bark that smells of garlic. At a sun-dappled clearing, fish splash in a watering hole. The trees around it have been scratched by elephant tusks.

To stand here in the slanting sunlight and imagine all this being razed is heart-stopping.

The place is not a park or a preserve but part of the Mouila oil palm plantation, operated by Olam. If it were in Indonesia or Malaysia – the world's two largest suppliers of palm oil – loggers and bulldozers might be closing in to clear the jungle for uniform rows of oil palm trees.

Oil palms, with giant bunches of red fruit growing beneath unruly fronds, are an ancient staple crop. For millennia humans have boiled and pounded their fruit to extract cooking oil, burned their seed-kernel shells for heat, and woven their leaves into everything from roofs to baskets. Over the past few decades, however, palm oil use has exploded – in part because of the versatility and creamy texture of the oil (think Oreo filling) and in part because of the productivity of the trees. They require only half as much land as other crops, such as soybeans, to generate a given amount of oil.

Palm oil is now the world's most popular vegetable oil, accounting for one-third of global consumption. It's a common cooking oil in India and some other countries. As an ingredient, it has become difficult to avoid almost everywhere. It's in all manner of supermarket items: cookies, pizza dough, bread, lipstick, lotion, soap. It's even in supposedly eco-friendly biodiesel: In 2017, 51 percent of the European Union's palm oil consumption was to power cars and trucks.

Worldwide, demand for palm oil continues to rise. India uses the most, 17 percent of the global total, followed by Indonesia, the EU, and China. The United States currently ranks eighth.

Supplying that demand has taken a huge toll. Since 1973, nearly 16,000 square

miles of rain forest on Borneo, the island shared by Malaysia and Indonesia, have been logged, burned, and bulldozed to make way for oil palm. It accounts for a fifth of the total deforestation on Borneo Since 1973 – and for 47 percent since 2000.

All that deforestation has been devastating for wildlife. Nearly 150,000 critically endangered Bornean orangutans perished from 1999 to 2015, and although the main culprits were logging and hunting, palm oil was a major factor. It also exacerbates climate change – nearly half of Indonesia’s greenhouse gas emissions come from deforestation and other land-use changes – as well as acute air pollution. The haze from Indonesian forest fires, many deliberately set to clear land for oil palms, caused at least 12,000 premature deaths in 2015 alone.

People in the path of plantations have suffered in other ways. Human rights abuses such as child labor and forced evictions have been well documented. On the Indonesian island of Sumatra, palm oil companies have sometimes bulldozed entire indigenous villages, leaving their residents homeless and reliant on government handouts.

That kind of shortsighted ecological rampaging is precisely what Gabon is trying to avoid. The Eden I visited will not be razed: Olam has protected it as part of an agreement with the government that allows the company to grow oil palms elsewhere on its concession.

“What we’re trying to do in Gabon is find a new development path where we don’t cut all our forest down but keep a balance between oil palm, agriculture, and forest preservation,” says Lee White, the conservation biologist who runs Gabon’s parks agency. As the nation of fewer than two million people embarks on industrial-scale agriculture, the government is using scientific assessments to decide which parts of its expansive forests have high conservation value and which can be opened to oil palms.

In Africa as in Southeast Asia, the crop is here to stay. Producing countries depend on the income. Boycotting palm oil is unwise: Alternative oil crops would swallow even more land. It’s also futile, because palm oil is so pervasive and so often processed into ingredients, such as sodium lauryl sulfate and stearic acid, whose origins are opaque to consumers. We’re not likely to cut palm oil consumption radically. The only way forward is to make its production less bad.