

Red alert

Carmel Egan

November 18, 2007



Safe for now: An orang-utan, driven from her forest home, cradles her baby in the Sepilok rehabilitation centre on Borneo.

Photo: Reuters

TO SOME it is liquid gold, to others, the harbinger of death - but to most Australians, palm oil is a complete mystery.

Yet, production of this oil - an ingredient in many of the foods we eat and products we use each day - comes at a devastating environmental cost. Millions of hectares of South-East Asian rainforest are being

destroyed to make way for new palm plantations, decimating some of the world's most threatened species, including Homo sapiens' nearest living relative, the orang-utan.

Malaysia and Indonesia produce 90% of the world's palm oil on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra - the only two locations where orang-utans still live in the wild.

But with predictions that palm oil will be the world's most internationally traded edible oil within five years, orang-utan welfare campaigners fear the further destruction of tropical lowland forests could push the orang-utan to the brink of extinction. In the two decades since palm oil plantations began to expand, orang-utan numbers have fallen from 200,000 to about 30,000.

The clear-felling in Indonesian Kalimantan and Malaysian Borneo has led to thousands of orang-utans being hunted, killed, orphaned, injured or sold into captivity.

But manufacturers cannot get enough of the versatile oil, which already is estimated to constitute up to 10% of the content of Australian processed foods. It is used in ice-cream, chocolate, biscuits, margarine, detergents, shampoos, toothpaste, lipsticks, paints and in the deep-fryers at most takeaway shops.

But look for "palm oil" on the ingredients label of your favourite supermarket products and the chances are it won't be there.

Manufacturers are required by law to declare the use of peanut, soy bean and sesame oils under food allergy regulations. Dairy products, identify the source of animal fats or oils. But not palm oil.

The plight of the orang-utan population and its inextricable link to the palm oil industry, was highlighted last week when Prime Minister John Howard pledged \$500,000 for Indonesia's endangered orang-utans after a chance encounter with 11-year-old orang-utan campaigner, cerebral palsy sufferer Daniel Clarke. The promise was televised nationally during the Liberal Party's election campaign launch with a YouTube video aimed at the environmentally aware younger voter.

Half-a-million dollars is not a sum to be sniffed at, says Sue Floyed, secretary of Borneo Orang-utan Survival (BOS) Australia, which raises funds to help finance three orang-utan sanctuaries in Kalimantan, the largest of which has 700 orang-utans. But they need more space.

"Frankly, \$500,000 means heaps," Floyed says. "We could buy land with money like that. No matter how it is allocated everybody involved in orang-utans is grateful."

But when weighed against the millions it takes annually to run and staff such sanctuaries, that \$500,000 over four years will not go far.

Orang-utans brought into refuges run by organisations such as BOS and the Australian Orang-utan Project are often orphaned babies whose mothers have been mutilated with machetes, clubbed, strangled or burnt to death.

They are considered pests by locals who are sometimes paid to catch them so they can be sold into captivity. Some have even been rescued from brothels.

While the Indonesian Government helps fund programs, sanctuaries and national parks, local government corruption and bribery are often

associated with the expansion of palm oil plantations.

But such pressure is not confined to estate owners. Ironically future plantation expansion will be driven by the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Palm oil yield per hectare outstrips tenfold the productivity of its major competitors - soy, peanut, sunflower - and it is rapidly becoming one of the world's most desirable biofuel crops.

Australia has two palm oil refineries, one in the Northern Territory and the other at Geelong. Natural Fuels Australia Limited owns the nation's largest biofuel refinery at Berrimah, in Darwin, and is aiming to produce 140 million litres in 2008 from 123,000 tonnes of palm oil.

Like many other refiners and manufacturers it is committed to purchasing oil only from certified sustainable plantations.

But rising with this boom industry is the real threat of orang-utan extinction. Conservationists argue that governments, manufacturers and retailers need to work in transparent co-operation so that consumers can make informed choices about the products they buy.

Yet there is no requirement in Australia for food manufacturers to declare palm oil on the ingredients list on food packaging unless they are making health claims.

That leaves consumers who want to avoid palm oil having to second guess the law makers and manufacturers: palm and coconut oils are the only vegetable oils high in saturated fats. If the ingredients list states "vegetable oil" and the nutrition panel shows the item has high levels of saturated fat, then it is likely to contain palm oil.

It is palm oil's level of saturated fats - 50% - which makes it so popular in the food industry. Higher levels of saturated fats give oils greater stability. They are less susceptible to rancidity and have longer shelf lives.

It also eliminates the need for hydrogenation, which turns natural oils into trans fats. International health authorities have moved against trans fatty acids over coronary heart disease fears.

But frustratingly for the food industry, public health campaigners are now warning against palm oil because of the health risks of saturated fats.

It is all too little too late for Mornington Peninsula mother-of-three Amanda Enright, who had her environmental awakening last September when Steve Irwin was killed by a stingray barb.

"I was traumatised, I really grieved," said Enright. "He was such an ambassador for environmental issues."

His death prompted Enright to attend a lecture at Melbourne University a month later by palm oil activist Michelle Desilets, director of Borneo Orang-utan Survival UK.

Desilets' campaign highlights the link between the clearing rainforest and destruction of orang-utan habitat and campaigns for sustainable palm oil manufacture through the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil.

The round table hopes by 2009 to be able to certify palm oil producers who have not degraded rainforests, have not cleared using fire, have

ensured wildlife corridors remain to connect forests and who do not offer bonuses to kill orang-utans.

"Consumers must demand a commitment from manufacturers and retailers to provide products which meet basic expectations so that we are not unwittingly contributing to forest destruction, species extinction and human rights abuses every time we visit the supermarket," Desilets told audiences in Melbourne.

Enright left Desilets' lecture determined never again to purchase products containing palm oil or its derivatives. "I was so frustrated in my efforts to stop buying products with palm oil in them," she said. "I went right through my supermarkets and pantry and wrote to the manufacturers to try to find out if it was palm oil they were using."

In October last year Enright made an application to the food standards authority to change the Australian labelling requirement of food containing palm oil to make it mandatory to list it. She is the only person to have lodged a formal application for such a review.

She said in her application that her proposed changes would "give consumers with ethical, environmental, religious or other reasons the ability to make informed choices and avoid certain foods".

So far, her application has not been acted on. It has been repeatedly delayed without explanation.

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/red-alert/2007/11/17/1194767020127.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap2>