

ABSTRACT

## The endless palm oil debate

### Science-based solutions beyond controversies

Alain Rival, PhD., CIRAD – Agricultural Research for Development, South East Asian Island Countries, Jakarta, Indonesia

**Opinionated and controversial debates currently dominate the public discourse on oil palm cultivation. The outstanding economic potential for the palm oil industry, from large plantations to small producers and for the development of poor countries stand in stark contrast to social and environmental impacts together with threat on sensitive tropical ecosystems. But boycotting of palm oil - as demanded by some people - is not a solution.**

#### THE PUBLIC CONTROVERSY

The present article focuses on the objectification of the sometimes ideological and irrational discussions on the cultivation of oil palm. Scientists are encouraged to participate in order to avoid the dissemination of simplified correlations and to promote a public discourse based on verified sources and evidence. The direct connection between oil palm plantations and deforestation belongs to this category of quick and simple statements. Various industrial and agricultural sectors, including palm oil, as well as several illegal activities share the responsibility for deforestation and environmental degradation in tropical areas.

#### SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

In order to ensure that the palm oil sector's share of deforestation is reduced to a minimum or will be lowered to zero, several sustainability initiatives have been launched in recent years, most notably the RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) and national approaches by the two largest palm oil producing countries, namely Indonesia and Malaysia.

An increasing number of stakeholders are taking part in these mostly voluntary initiatives and are pushing them further, based on even clearer and more stringent criteria. These are for example POIG (Palm Oil Innovation Group) and RSPO Next.

#### HIGHER YIELDS PER HECTARE WITH THE OIL PALM

The oil palm offers exceptional oil yields of 3.8 tons per hectare (t/ha) as a global average, nearly 6 t/ha in the best plantations in Southeast Asia and more than 10 t/ha in the highest yielding genetic trials currently underway in research institutions. Such yields make the oil palm the leader of industrial oil crops. The proportion of the oil palm in worldwide production of vegetable oils has continued to grow over recent decades to reach the number one spot, ahead of soybean. Today it accounts for over a third of the vegetable oil produced worldwide. Above its outstanding oil productivity, the oil palm proves to be a very versatile crop as its oil can replace most other vegetable oils and it has a very wide range of uses. Indeed, the agri-food industry absorbs around 80% of global production for table oil, frying oil, margarines, fat for bakery products, patisserie and all types of food preparation. Oleochemicals accounts for 15% of usage, including: cosmetics, soap production, lubricants and greases, candles, pharmaceutical products, surfactants, agrochemicals, paint and lacquer, electronics... Today, around 5% of produced palm oil is used for biodiesel.

#### BOYCOTT IS NO SOLUTION

To simply boycott palm oil will not solve any of the most urgent problems. First, this would promote the cultivation of alternative crops, which on the one hand provide less oil yield per hectare and on the other hand do not necessarily have a better ecological and social balance. And second, the demand for sustainably produced palm oil on the world would collapse, because only western markets actually demand certified sustainable palm oil. Indeed a boycott of palm oil would promote the emergence on non-certified palm oil thus having the opposite effect to what is actually urgent to be achieved.