


2017

Foreword

Deborah Lapidus
Mighty-Campaign Director

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/envirolabasia>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Asian History Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [East Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Environmental Policy Commons](#), [Environmental Sciences Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [Policy History, Theory, and Methods Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), [Social Policy Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lapidus, Deborah () "Foreword," *EnviroLab Asia*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 2.
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/envirolabasia/vol1/iss1/2>

This Front Matter is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Claremont at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in EnviroLab Asia by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Foreword

Cover Page Footnote

Deborah Lapidus is Mighty's Campaigns Director, with a significant focus on the palm oil industry in Indonesia and Malaysia. Her campaigns for the environment and public health have engaged tens of thousands of people, representing a wide range of constituencies. Prior to her work with Mighty, Deborah was the Outreach Director at Climate Advisers where she directed the Forest Heroes campaign, a successful international initiative that persuaded some of the world's largest consumer and agricultural companies to eliminate deforestation from their supply chains, including Kellogg, Dunkin' Donuts, Krispy Kreme, suppliers representing the overwhelming major of palm oil trade and some of the largest palm oil producers in Indonesia. Deborah's work has generated extensive news coverage, earning her interviews on MSNBC, the New York Times, NPR, USA Today, and many others. Deborah is a graduate of Green Corps, a fellowship for environmental organizing, and a two-time recipient of the Morris K. Udall Scholarship for Environmental Leadership. She is a magna cum laude graduate of Brown University.

Foreward

Deborah Lapidus¹

Tropical rainforests are the lungs of the Earth, breathing in carbon dioxide and breathing out oxygen. They're also home to more than half of the world's species, even though they take up less than six percent of the global land area. But tropical deforestation is threatening these forests, their inhabitants and the world's climate – generating more pollution than all the cars, trucks, ships, and planes in the world combined. The world cannot solve the climate crisis without solving the tropical deforestation crisis.

At the heart of the threat to the world's rainforests is the palm oil industry. Palm oil is used as a cooking oil in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, and is found in 50% of consumer goods globally as a very unhealthy additive to cookies, crackers, doughnuts, and other baked goods, an ingredient in detergent and soaps, and increasingly as a source of biofuel. Cultivation of palm oil, which originated in Africa, began in Southeast Asia in the 1970s and its production grew rapidly. Today, vast monoculture palm oil plantations have been planted on over 17 million hectares of land (170,000 square kilometers), the majority of which has come at the expense of rainforests in Indonesia and Malaysia¹, which together produce 85% of the world's palm oil.

Palm oil has been lucrative for a relatively small number of corporate executives—often foreign businessmen—who sit at the top of the largest palm oil companies. But their gains have come at an extreme cost to the region's environment, health, and culture, as well as the world's biodiversity and climate. Today, growing global awareness of these consequences threaten to upend the entire palm oil industry, unless there are fundamental changes to the way that it operates.

As this volume will explore, the impacts of rampant growth of the palm oil industry are well-documented and severe: Palm oil plantations have pushed species like orangutans, Sumatran rhinoceroses, and elephants to the edge of extinction. They have displaced indigenous communities who have been forced off their customary lands and often left with severely

¹ Deborah Lapidus is Mighty's Campaigns Director, with a significant focus on the palm oil industry in Indonesia and Malaysia. Her campaigns for the environment and public health have engaged tens of thousands of people, representing a wide range of constituencies. Prior to her work with Mighty, Deborah was the Outreach Director at Climate Advisers where she directed the Forest Heroes campaign, a successful international initiative that persuaded some of the world's largest consumer and agricultural companies to eliminate deforestation from their supply chains, including Kellogg, Dunkin' Donuts, Krispy Kreme, suppliers representing the overwhelming major of palm oil trade and some of the largest palm oil producers in Indonesia. Deborah's work has generated extensive news coverage, earning her interviews on MSNBC, the New York Times, NPR, USA Today, and many others. Deborah is a graduate of Green Corps, a fellowship for environmental organizing, and a two-time recipient of the Morris K. Udall Scholarship for Environmental Leadership. She is a magna cum laude graduate of Brown University.

damaged ecosystems, polluted water and air, soil erosion, and lack of viable areas for foraging and hunting. The industry's impacts are also global. Palm oil is the biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Southeast Asia, particularly due to the destruction of carbon-rich peatlands. In the fall of 2015, peatland burning for palm oil and pulp & paper emitted more carbon dioxide than the entire United States economy for 38 out of 56 days in a row,² and caused hazardous air quality that resulted in an estimated 100,000 premature deaths in the region,³ regarded by the Indonesian Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency as a "crime against humanity."⁴ The impact of deforestation on the climate is so enormous that it takes 86 years for palm oil biodiesel produced on rainforest to pay back the carbon debt created through deforestation, and 423 years when carbon-rich peatland rainforest is cleared to make way for palm oil biodiesel⁵.

A Better Option: Expansion onto Degraded Lands

The tragedy of all this deforestation and climate pollution is that it's entirely avoidable, as some companies and countries have already shown. There are 125 million hectares of degraded lands available in the tropics where palm oil and other commodities can be grown without destroying additional forests or natural ecosystems. That's more than enough land to meet the agricultural needs of our growing population decades into the future. In Indonesia alone, there are 6-10 million hectares of degraded lands available for planting⁶. Much of this land is covered with invasive *alang-alang* (*Imperata Cylindrica*) grasses. Several recent economic analyses show that establishing palm plantations on *alang-alang* lands is \$270 per hectare cheaper than establishing them on forests and \$960 per hectare cheaper than on peatlands.⁷ Nonetheless, most palm oil companies have continued to focus on clearing forest and peatland instead of degraded land because the initial upfront cost can be lower and less time-consuming to get a concession – often by bribing a corrupt government official – for large palm plantation development on a national forest estate. In fact, sometimes palm oil companies can make significant additional money upfront by selling the timber they cut down, often illegally. Degraded land, in contrast, often must be purchased from existing owners, which violates the palm oil industry's unfortunate traditional model of cheap land and cheap or slave labor.⁸

The "No Deforestation" Revolution

Mighty works to protect forests, oceans, and the climate. One of our key goals is to eliminate the global market for deforestation-based palm oil and we work with many allies around the world who are committed to this same objective. We believe that eliminating this market can end large-scale deforestation for palm oil by 2020, cutting greenhouse gas emissions by up to 10 gigatons - one quarter of the pollution produced by the entire world. This work will also save the homes of critically endangered species like pygmy elephants, orangutans, Sumatran tigers, and rhinoceroses. More broadly, we have had great success in leveraging victories in the palm oil industry to win commitments from other major commodity traders to eliminate deforestation from all their supply chains, including beef, soy, rubber, cocoa, coffee, and other products.

The good news is that the foundation for success has already been laid. Over the past few years, consumers around the world have mobilized to demand that the companies who sell food, cosmetics, and personal care products only source from suppliers that are not driving deforestation or human rights abuses. Companies that refused to listen found passionate

customers rallying outside their stores, banners dropped over their corporate headquarters, and investors clamoring about the reputational risk of exposing their business to rainforest destruction and species extinction. As a result, the world's largest consumer companies such as Nestle, Unilever, Kellogg's, and dozens more have adopted policies committing to only source from companies who are producing palm oil and other commodities responsibly and sustainably. The marketplace responded, and now many of the world's largest traders and producers of palm oil and pulp & paper have adopted comprehensive company-wide "No Deforestation, No Peat, and No Exploitation" policies that apply not only to their own operations, but also to that of their direct and third-party suppliers. Today, the vast majority of globally traded palm oil is covered by these responsible sourcing policies. The widespread adoption of No Deforestation sourcing policies has been happening in rapid succession beginning in 2013, and is considered to be nothing short of a revolution in global agriculture. A new standard for responsible agriculture has been set and it rests firmly on the principles of forest conservation and respect for human rights.

Indeed, while our movement began fueled by moral force, it now also has the power of economics behind it: Traders and consumer companies are increasingly suspending companies that are out of compliance with their No Deforestation policies. For example, last year our team worked with allies such as Union of Concerned Scientists, Greenpeace and Rainforest Action Network to successfully persuade two dozen of the world's largest palm oil buyers, including Unilever, Nestle, Kellogg, Dunkin' Donuts, and biofuels giant Neste Oil, to suspend purchases from the Malaysian palm oil company IOI after the company breached its No Deforestation policy and was suspended by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. Its share price dropped almost 15% in the month following the suspension, representing a \$4 billion decline in value. Deforestation—once seen by agribusiness titans as a cheap and easy way to make huge profits—is increasingly becoming a major business liability.

Despite this progress, serious challenges have emerged over the past year and a half that show the continued need for action on the ground in Southeast Asia and around the world. Palm oil and pulp & paper companies burned about 2.5 million hectares of forest and peat during the 2015 haze crisis, costing Indonesia an estimated \$19 billion. As our investigation⁹ into Korean-Indonesian agribusiness Korindo uncovered last year, this burning even reached frontier areas like Papua (Indonesian New Guinea). Papua has the largest remaining intact rainforest landscapes in Indonesia, which are home to indigenous groups, flora, and fauna entirely distinct from that of the rest of Asia, including adorable tree kangaroos and cassowaries, and colourful birds of paradise. Unfortunately, Papua is also the new frontier for global palm oil and timber expansion, putting its incredible forests at risk. In Malaysia's Sarawak, a global epicentre of peatland clearance, the situation remains opaque despite private sector reforms and previously unimaginable pro-conservation statements by the government. Our recent report on global agribusiness giant Olam, demonstrates that many of Southeast Asia's destructive models for commodity agriculture are being exported to new areas in Africa and beyond¹⁰. These examples demonstrate that individual company action alone is not sufficient fully to protect the forests of Southeast Asia or any other region. As investigations by Mighty and our allies reveal on a regular basis, and as ongoing satellite imagery of deforestation and fires illustrates, companies still do not adequately monitor themselves, nor adhere to their promises without strong civil society pressure.

A Model for Enduring Success? Soybeans in the Amazon

By the mid 1990s, soy was a major driver of Amazonian deforestation. In response to this emerging crisis, civil society organizations in Europe, the U.S. and Brazil launched major efforts to educate consumers and companies about supply chain links to deforestation. Critically, these efforts were targeted at the most high-impact point of the supply chain, the handful of global soy trading companies like ADM and Cargill. Facing demand from consumer-facing companies like McDonald's, Cadbury Schweppes and supermarket chains, the major soy traders successfully persuaded their Brazilian suppliers to agree to a moratorium on deforestation for soy. The 2006 moratorium has worked extraordinarily well: deforestation for soy declined from over 25 percent of Amazon deforestation to 0.25 percent and has stayed under 1% for the last decade.¹¹

As the next phase in the Zero Deforestation revolution, Mighty is calling on the palm oil industry, as well as other major drivers of Southeast Asia's deforestation like the pulp & paper and rubber industries, to band together to create an effective and comprehensive joint action system to monitor and police deforestation. This system would be modeled after the Brazilian Soy Moratorium, which remains the best available example of large-scale forest protection on the planet. Such a unified private sector approach would also catalyze complementary government action, which is ultimately needed to secure enduring protection of Southeast Asia's forests.

These rapidly evolving industry standards shunning forest destruction offer hope that we can save our remaining forests and potentially even restore vast areas that have been degraded. But the clock is ticking for species on the brink of extinction like the orangutan or for the indigenous communities being pushed off their lands, and for our climate that can only be stabilized at 1.5 degrees with the help of forests. Great change is possible, but only if we act with great urgency.

We are thus tremendously grateful to Yale NUS for its commitment to providing perspective and analysis on the scientific, political, anthropological, ecological, and economic dimensions of this challenge. Such an interdisciplinary approach is essential given that palm oil production is at the intersection of so many global challenges—climate change, indigenous rights, conservation & biodiversity, sustainable development, and so much more—as exemplified in this informative volume.

¹ <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378016300814>

² World Resources Institute, <http://www.wri.org/blog/2015/10/indonesia's-fire-outbreaks-producing-more-daily-emissions-entire-us-economy>.

³ Shannon Koplitz et al., "Public health impacts of the severe haze in Equatorial Asia in September - October 2015: demonstration of a new framework for informing fire management strategies to reduce downwind smoke exposure," *Environmental Research Letters* 11 (2015):9.

⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/29/asia/southeast-asia-haze-crisis/>

⁵ http://www.atmos.washington.edu/2009Q1/111/Readings/Fargione2008_biofuel_land-clearing.pdf

⁶ Gingold, Beth. “Degraded Land, Sustainable Palm Oil, and Indonesia’s Future” World Resources Institute. July 13, 2010.

⁷ Fairhurst, T., and D. McLaughlin. 2009. Sustainable oil palm development on degraded land in Kalimantan. Washington, DC: World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Fairhurst, T., M. McLeish, and R. Prasodjo. 2010. *Conditions required by the private sector for oil palm expansion on degraded land in Indonesia*. Assessment prepared for the Prince’s Rainforests Project by Tropical Crops Consultants Limited. Wye, UK.

⁸ Fisher, B., D.P. Edwards, X. Giam, and D.S. Wilcove. 2011. The high costs of conserving Southeast Asia’s lowland rainforests. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 9(6):329–334.

⁹ www.MightyEarth.org/BurningParadise

¹⁰ <http://www.mightyearth.org/blackbox/>

¹¹ Rudorff, B.F.T., M. Adami, D.A. Aguiar, M.A. Moreira, M.P. Mello, L. Fabiani, D.F. Amaral, and B.M. Pires. 2011. The soy moratorium in the Amazon biome monitored by remote sensing images. *Remote Sensing* 3(1):185–202. and ABIOVE et al. “Soy Moratorium: Soybean Planting in the Amazon Biome Fourth Year of Mapping and Monitoring.” 2011.