



Prepared on 21/03/2017 by Alexis Heeren, with Findings and Recommendations copied from Laurie King's dissertation.

Living Lab project summary – Sustainable palm oil options

Description of the paper

This paper describes the findings of dissertation research into the environmental and human / workers rights concerns associated with palm oil production, and possible sourcing approaches at the University of Edinburgh.

Research question

What sustainability issues are association with palm oil and how should the University of Edinburgh respond?

Objectives

1. Explore the pros and cons of existing initiatives (certification labels/codes of conduct, multi-stakeholder initiatives) to produce sustainable palm oil, particularly the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil.
2. Understand what products procured by the University and EUSA contain palm oil.
3. Find out to what extent palm oil used products procured by the University and EUSA is already 'sustainable'.
4. Recommend ways the University and EUSA can reduce the risks of buying products that contain palm oil from unsustainable and unethical sources.

Findings and recommendations

Text copied from Laurie King's dissertation:

"In recognition of the profound environmental and social impacts of the palm oil industry, this study attempted to explore the legitimacy of 'certified sustainable palm oil' (CSPO), guided by a multi-stakeholder initiative known as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). In doing so, it investigated the prevalence of palm oil containing products at the University of Edinburgh and EUSA, making recommendations for the reduction of environmental and social risks.

In answering research question 1: "what are the pros and cons of an existing multi-stakeholder initiative that promotes sustainable palm oil?", the RSPO was critically examined. The literature revealed that while the organisation has propagated a proliferation of CSPO, its democratic potential is hindered by the evident exclusion of local communities who may oppose the plantations. Furthermore, only two ('Identity Preserved' and 'Segregated') of the certification methods available commit to 100% CSPO in the end product. The latter issue was selected to be examined further throughout the fieldwork.

Research question 2; “which products procured by the University and EUSA are at high risk of containing palm oil?”, set the groundwork for cross-campus empirical data collection. Identifying the high risk categories as ‘confectionery’, ‘bakery’ and ‘cleaning’ products, spot checks were conducted across ACE and EUSA cafes. While EUSA bakery products were seemingly palm oil free, this information could not be adequately traced for ACE.

Research question 3 was then investigated: “using case studies, to what extent is palm oil sustainability already taken into account?”. Firstly, hand soap at the University was explored. Procured from Kimberly Clark Professional, the palm oil that this product contains was untraceable. Two confectionery companies were then investigated: Mondelēz International (supplying Cadbury chocolate) and Kellogg. The former was found to be relying heavily on the ‘Book & Claim’ certification method, which does not adequately address the environmental and social impacts of palm oil production, given that it justifies the continued usage of highly damaging conventional techniques. Kellogg, on the other hand, supplies 92% of its European products through the ‘Segregated’ method, increasing the legitimacy of its approach to sustainable palm oil.

Lastly, research question 4 was considered: “how can the University and EUSA reduce the environmental and social risks of the palm oil containing products they buy?”. This part of the research drew upon existing procurement and sustainability strategies to develop two key recommendations: looking for alternatives to palm oil; and ensuring high level certification in cases where palm oil containing products have to be procured.

Finding alternatives to palm oil is the lowest risk recommendation, particularly with regard to social factors, along with the goals of health and local provenance set out by the Food for Life Silver and Gold awards. Furthermore, it is the option that responds most accurately to the visions laid out in the University’s Good Food Policy. Palm oil free confectionery such as Nakd Bars and Eat Natural Bars, along with fresh/dried fruit, are all possible considerations out of many. If palm oil containing products are to be procured, however, those certified via the ‘Identity Preserved’ and ‘Segregated’ methods ensure the least risk out of the four certification methods, particularly regarding environmental factors. Products certified under ‘Mass Balance’ only partially use CSPO, while those under ‘Book & Claim’ do not use CSPO at all. Only the highest two methods ensure the presence of 100% CSPO.

While outside the scope of this study, it would be useful to also consider the contents of vending machines, as well as hot food. Accordingly, a thorough assessment of food and cleaning products procured by the University and EUSA may be undertaken in an attempt to illustrate the prevalence of palm oil and certification method used for each product. This has already been conducted by Edinburgh and Bristol zoos, so communication with them is advisable.

Overall, it is vital that procurement at the University of Edinburgh and EUSA is infused with a conscientious commitment to balancing environmental, social and economic factors in equal measure. Sustainability, is, after all, a consideration of long term, equitable renewal. While phasing out palm oil altogether seemingly carries the least amount of environmental and social risk, the only low risk approaches to procuring palm oil containing products themselves are through the ‘Identity Preserved’ and ‘Segregated’ certification methods.”