

## Palm Oil – An Eco-Nightmare?

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The term "tarred with the same brush" is a phrase that's oft used. As a general manner of speaking, it means to be guilty of the same behavior, or acting in the same manner as someone else, or likely to be considered the same as someone else because of similar behavior.

If we try to trace the origin of the phrase, the root words are "to tar", meaning to defile or dirty. The idiom appears in print first in 1818, in one of Sir Walter Scott's novels, *Rob Roy*: "They are a rank of the same stick – rank Jacobites and Papists." Our modern form appears in William Cobbett's *Rural Rides* in 1823: "You are all tarred with the same brush", said the sensible people of Maidstone.

The idea behind it is that two individuals who have been liberally daubed or painted with the same tar brush look much the same and so appear to have the same characteristics. The links of the colour black with matters that were detestable, dishonourable or evil also added to the negative sense.

Regrettably, Malaysian palm oil today comes frequently under attack from well meaning but sadly misinformed NGO's and environmental lobby groups especially in Europe and the United States. As the largest producer of palm oil in the world and due perhaps to its proximity to Indonesia, the second largest producer, Malaysia is often mentioned in the same breath as Indonesia, accused of unsound environmental practices. A recent article in the *New York Times* and another in the *International Herald Tribune*, the articles argued that "when scientists studied palm oil plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia, this green fairy tale began to look more like an environmental nightmare".

The articles went on to contend that the rising demand for palm oil in Europe brought about "the clearing of large tracts of South East Asian rainforests" and worse still, "space for the expanding palm plantations was often created by draining and burning peat-land".

Clearing large tracts of rainforests? Burning? Draining peat-land? These wanton and disingenuous accusations do not stand up to the slightest test of scrutiny! It stands to reason that the sheer cavalier and superciliousness of the arguments lead one to suspect that these so-called scientists have never set foot in Malaysia, let alone studied oil palm plantations in Malaysia.

For one, both Malaysia and Indonesia have a long history of oil palm plantations. The Dutch brought oil palm seedlings to Bogor much sooner than the British, who brought oil palms to Malaya. As a mature industry in Malaysia, there is no necessity to clear large tracts of rainforests and most replanting is carried out on existing plantations or on old rubber land and as a last resort in logged over areas - areas that have been previously logged over by the timber industry. The government too has stepped in to ensure that sustainable best practices are observed in the industry.

For instance, the Sabah State Government has set up the Deramakot Forest Reserve which preserves more than 60% of Sabah's natural forest cover. This translates to more than 3.9 million hectares of forest reserves, parks, wildlife sanctuaries and water catchment areas. The Malaysian Palm Oil Council too has set up \$5 Million Wildlife Conservation Fund to champion bio-diversity worldwide.

For another, slash burning and draining of peat land is not practiced by planters in Malaysia at all! Each year, it is true that towards the dryer months of July and August, Malaysia is blanketed by smoke from the indiscriminate slash burning and clearing of rainforests by a neighboring country. But Malaysia is a victim and not a happy camper in this regard. In fact, the country dispatches technical experts and fire fighting teams to this neighboring country to help fight the fires indiscriminately set by cultivators. Rather than drain peat land, the country has put in place vigorous measures to replant mangroves growing on these peat lands.

The truth of the matter is that Malaysia has one of the most stringent environmental laws in the world, and this is vigorously enforced especially in the agricultural sectors of the economy. According to an UNESCAP Report datelined 1977, Malaysia had already promulgated an Environment Quality Act as early as 1974 to put in place environmentally sound technology to control effluent discharge by the oil palm industry.

Dr. Geoffrey Davison, Program Director of the WWF- Malaysia, points out that the WWF has been working with the Malaysian Palm Oil Association and leading plantation companies to address the environmental concerns on the ground, and to make sure the industry adheres to best practices that will ensure sustainable development. THE END.