

PALM OIL GUIDE FAQ

WHY IS RFUK NO LONGER UPDATING THE PALM OIL GUIDE?

Our research partner on the guide, Ethical Consumer, will continue to put out product guide updates through their magazine. When we launched the first section of the guide on chocolate in 2013, there was relatively little mainstream awareness of the impact of palm oil on forests and forest people. By joining up with Ethical Consumer we helped to shine a light on the issue and to get the UK public thinking about what was in their food, cosmetics and household detergents. In recent years, more and more organisations have picked up on palm oil leading to an array of scorecards and guides and we now want to focus our limited resources on tackling what we see as the problem at source: the way in which palm oil companies are offered areas of forestland to clear for their plantations, regardless of the impact on the environment or local people.

DOES THIS MEAN THAT THE JOB IS DONE REGARDING PALM OIL?

Absolutely not! Greater transparency on sustainability issues along the palm oil supply chain has highlighted how inadequate current practices and reporting frameworks are (see RSPO below). While some companies have gradually improved their palm oil sourcing policies and reporting practice, others have slipped backwards and many are still lagging behind. Furthermore, even where companies are reported to be doing well, we've seen that in practice they aren't able to fully hold their suppliers and producers to account. A recent investigation has for example revealed evidence of human rights abuses by palm oil companies which are RSPO certified¹.

WHAT IS RFUK'S VIEW ON "COMPANY COMMITMENTS" E.G. TO BE DEFORESTATION FREE BY 2020?

The trouble with these kinds of commitments is that they are not legally binding and have no material sanction attached. While employees of some companies may have very good intentions, commitments can just as easily serve to earn other companies more time to defer action to the future. Companies may point to the absence of legally binding compliance frameworks that they could otherwise be held to. Even the best intentioned companies are struggling to turn their commitments into reality. Ongoing scrutiny by consumers on where companies are sourcing their palm oil is important.

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/palm-oil-global-brands-profitting-from-child-and-forced-labour/>

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WHAT IS RFUK'S VIEW ON THE ROUNDTABLE ON SUSTAINABLE PALM OIL (RSPO)?

RFUK's view borne from two decades of working in environments where commodity exploitation has run amok is that voluntary 'demand-side' actions, such as timber or palm oil certification, will always be of limited effectiveness. While some groups say that RSPO is 'the best there is until something better comes along', the reality is that it has not managed to address some systemic weaknesses, and seems particularly poorly adapted to work in the region where the threat is growing fastest, ie the Congo Basin in Africa. The experience from the most comparable commodity certification scheme, the Forest Stewardship Council, has been one of continuous weakening of standards and procedures, and there are reasons to believe the RSPO will follow a similar trajectory. Ultimately, international pressure is needed on government which allocate the land for, and determine the environmental and social standards applying to, palm oil companies. Voluntary measures such as RSPO cannot substitute for this, and in some ways they might reduce the chances of such pressure ever happening.

ISN'T THE PALM OIL GUIDE BASED TO A LARGE EXTENT ON DATA SUBMITTED TO THE RSPO?

Yes, reluctantly, RSPO data is the best we have had. We hope that will change. The guide also looked at non-RSPO issues and under Ethical Consumer's stewardship will continue to award marks for non-RSPO factors. The evidence for the growing inadequacy of the RSPO system is one of the reasons we are stopping producing our guide.

WHAT IS RFUK DOING ABOUT PALM OIL?

Our 2013 investigation revealed that many of the palm oil companies implicated in clearing the rainforests of South East Asia are turning their attention to the Congo Basin. RFUK has conducted field investigations into the operations of a number of concessions to assess their impact, and working with local organisations and communities on the ground to challenge them. With more support, we will be able to expand our work. [You can donate to us here.](#)