

Oil Change

The U.S. imports one million metric tons of palm oil a year, a bulk of which ends up in your makeup bag. But with increased scrutiny on ingredient sourcing, the beauty industry is rethinking its approach to the controversial commodity. By Jocelyn C. Zuckerman.

SITTING IN THE SHADE OF AN OIL-PALM GROVE IN northern Malaysian Borneo, Linella Pallai, 47, and her friend Trisar Sarigoh, 52, are describing what it was like before palm-oil mania swept their country. As children, the two women would gather fruit from the rain forest and fish from clear-running streams. But today, they tell me, the once-lush ecosystem feels like an endless sea of palm. They eat mostly processed food and are troubled by a dark haze that rolls in periodically from the Indonesian side of the island, where carbon-rich peatlands are burned to clear the land for new plantations. "Life here was very different," Pallai acknowledges.

These are just a few local consequences of the exploding global industry centered on the most versatile, least expensive vegetable oil in the world. As rain forests are cleared, natural habitats—including those once home to such endangered species as the orangutan—have been devastated. Harvesting and processing the shiny, spiky bunches of the oil-palm tree's tangerine-colored fruit has been linked to massive greenhouse gas emissions, and labor and human rights abuses on plantations are not uncommon.

An alternative to the artificial trans fats recently banned by the Food and Drug Administration, palm oil is in everything from cookies and ice cream to ramen noodles and protein bars. But its derivatives also lurk in an astounding 70 percent of our cosmetics, where they serve as both emulsifiers and surfactants. Thanks largely to its complicated refining and manufacturing processes, the personal-care industry has managed to avoid fallout for any use of "conflict palm oil." Now, however, as beauty obsessives demand transparency, major brands are beginning to respond.

I traveled 9,500 miles from Brooklyn to meet Pallai and Sarigoh, as they are participants in a new initiative aimed at helping

independent farmers improve their growing practices to earn environmental certification—and the premiums such accreditation commands from big companies looking to clean up their operations. Coordinated by the Malaysian NGO Wild Asia, the project—Sustainable Palm Oil and Traceability with Sabah (SPOTS) small producers—is being supported by a champion in France: L'Oréal Paris.

About 98 percent of the 60,000 metric tons of palm-based derivatives that L'Oréal purchases each year comes from Malaysia and Indonesia, says Alexandra Palt, who oversees sustainability for the \$27 billion beauty company. "Each of the mills that feeds our sourcing refineries gets fruit from scores of farmers," she explains. If executed successfully, SPOTS, which hopes to add hundreds more farmers in the next few years, will help mitigate the side effects—including deforestation and labor abuses—of our reliance on the prodigious crop. The goal is one now shared by companies such as Estée Lauder and Colgate-Palmolive. Unilever, which buys more of the commodity than most other consumer-goods conglomerates, for use in products like Dove soap and Pond's cold cream, recently committed to tracing its entire palm-oil supply by 2019.

On her fifteen-acre Borneo plantation, Pallai now wears protective gloves, boots, and a mask while also applying significantly smaller amounts of pesticides and fertilizers. Such SPOTS-inspired improvements have helped her yields—and her income—go steadily up. It's low season during my visit, so she is taking in only about \$350 a month, most of which is already spoken for, between the pair of farmhands she's had to bring on and the school uniform and textbooks required for her high school-age daughter. As for the rest? That will go toward "the necessities," she says: "clothes, food—and makeup." □

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