

# Palm oil is bad for the environment, but not *that* bad

European sunflower oil and rapeseed oil are not necessarily better for nature and the environment than palm oil from the tropical rainforests of Indonesia and Malaysia, according to a new study published in *Nature*.

Palm oil plantations in Southeast Asia have certainly destroyed large swathes of tropical rainforest, including orangutan habitats, while the resulting land drainage and forest fires create massive CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and reduce biodiversity. But other oil crops do not score much higher, shows the study, which emeritus professor of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Herbert Prins contributed to. Oil palm is a highly efficient crop, producing 39 per cent of the world's cooking oil on 'just' 22.5 million hectares, or 6.6 per cent of the global oil crop acreage. Soya beans perform considerably worse in that regard, producing much less oil from an acreage five times larger. The soya industry therefore causes far more deforestation than palm oil plantations.

## Red List

The 'European oil crops' score remarkably poorly too. Crops like rapeseed and sunflowers yield three to four times less oil than oil palm, despite covering a greater surface. Admittedly, those fields

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Cultivation of rapeseed and sunflowers for oil also endangers many Red List animals

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have not been carved out of tropical rainforest. But they do not capture CO<sub>2</sub> in the form of trees, and they use large amounts of fertilizer and pesticides. The researchers also looked at biodiversity, including how many mammals, amphibians and birds in the cooking oil producing areas are on the Red List maintained by the conservation organization IUCN. Oil palm cultivation in Indonesia and Malaysia threatens 472 species on the Red List, while in Europe rapeseed and sunflowers endanger 227 and 189 species respectively. Considerably fewer, in other words, but still a lot. The researchers' conclusion: don't single out palm oil when it comes to sustainable agriculture. AS



Oil palm. Photo Shutterstock