

Palm Oil Position Statement

Approved by the AZA Board of Directors in July 2014.

AZA Position

AZA recognizes that unsustainable palm oil production results in massive deforestation, rapid biodiversity loss in tropical ecosystems, and significant greenhouse gas emissions. Global consumption of palm oil and its derivatives is increasing, requiring strong conservation action to save species.

By facilitating change through audience and stakeholder engagement, AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums are well positioned to help break the link between palm oil production and deforestation.

Rationale

As a major driver of deforestation in tropical regions, unsustainable palm oil cultivation poses a significant threat to biodiversity.^{1,2,3} The ancient forests of southeast Asia, for example, are known to harbor an incredibly rich array of flora and fauna,^{4,5} and these same forests are disappearing at a rapid rate due in large part to agricultural expansion.^{6,7} Land clearance for oil palm cultivation has accelerated in the last few decades, expanding more than 6.5 million hectares in Indonesia and Malaysia alone.⁸ Although Southeast Asia is currently the most adversely affected, the production of unsustainable palm oil has also spread to tropical South America and Africa, with the same negative effects.^{9,10,11} While deforestation is the most commonly cited result of unsustainable oil palm expansion, impacts extend to fresh water and marine environments¹² as well as drivers of climate change.^{7,9} As a result, a vast array of animals and plants are threatened with extinction, and some have already succumbed.^{13,14}

The emergence of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) as a third-party certification scheme through which certified sustainable palm oil (CSPO) can be achieved has begun to make inroads in improving the environmental responsibility of the oil palm market.^{15,16,17} The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has defined sustainable agricultural practices as maintaining or enhancing three categories: economic viability, the natural resource base and other ecosystems influenced by agriculture.¹⁸ Currently the most well known and best represented organization involved in certifying palm oil as sustainable, the RSPO utilizes standards based on an evolving set of Principles and Criteria (P&C)¹⁹ that speak to economic, social justice, legal and environmental issues related to the palm oil industry. These P&C, made up of 39 criteria under eight principles agreed upon by stakeholders in the palm oil supply chain, are designed to limit the environmental impacts of growing and processing palm oil²⁰ and are reviewed and updated every five years.

Although there are many steps needed across multiple sectors to ensure that palm oil certified as sustainable by the RSPO is deforestation-free, AZA understands that the RSPO is a critical part of the solution to the palm oil conservation crisis. AZA also recognizes that the production and uptake of existing CSPO is a key first step to stemming the tide of tropical deforestation. However, in order to drive the global market toward CSPO that is truly deforestation-free, a push for transformation must come from the citizens of Europe, USA and Australia, who together consumed nearly 17% of the world's palm oil in 2011.⁸

AZA Action

AZA recognizes the urgent need to protect habitat for wildlife threatened by unsustainable palm oil production, and believes zoos and aquariums have the power to address this need by engaging a broad spectrum of audiences and stakeholder groups to facilitate change. These groups include, but are not limited to, our collective 180 million visitors as well as our online audiences, school groups, members, donors, local communities, vendors and concessionaries, board members, government officials and corporate partners.

AZA also recognizes that the palm oil industry plays an important role in employment and economic growth for developing countries,¹⁵ and that moves away from palm oil will likely drive demand elsewhere for less productive vegetable oils¹⁷ with unknown and potentially more damaging social and environmental impacts. For these reasons, AZA feels the negative consequences associated with a boycott may be too great and does not recommend boycotting palm oil as a strategy to drive change that will reduce deforestation and protect habitat.

AZA supports market transformation by driving demand for traceable palm oil not linked to deforestation and a transparent process to ensure this shift is moving forward.

While AZA supports the work of the RSPO and ongoing RSPO efforts towards the adoption of truly sustainable production standards, we recognize that current RSPO certification could be improved in some areas. The improvements should include stronger regulations on green house gas emissions, specifically in regards to planting on peat of any depth as well as more robust protection of High Conservation Value (HCV) and High Carbon Stock (HCS) forest areas. Further, an emphasis on regular, thorough reporting among RSPO member companies and stronger action to address violators of the RSPO's own Principles and Criteria would enhance the Roundtable's position as curator of sustainability in the palm oil industry.

AZA, therefore, also supports the following strategies to engage zoo and aquarium audiences and stakeholders to help break the link between palm oil production and deforestation:

- Y Leverage the combined power of zoo and aquarium audiences to effect change.

- Y Provide tools to allow every person to advocate for deforestation-free palm oil.
- Y Make the use of deforestation-free palm oil a social norm.
- Y Facilitate change through stakeholder engagement and dialogue.

These strategies, and their associated objectives and outcomes, are intended to provide a framework for the use and development of measurable tools that allow zoos and aquariums addressing the palm oil conservation crisis to achieve the goal of habitat protection that sustains wildlife.

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