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## Is the Oil Palm Industry Sustainable?\*

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*As the world's population increases, food production must be increased in parallel, and must be sustainable. Sustainability has environmental, social and economic components. Destruction of the natural environment must be minimised, and cultivated land must be used intensively. With yields higher than other oil crops, the oil palm will play an increasingly important role in future. Because most expansion has been on previously forested land, the crop is seen as a major threat to primary forest, but in fact the rate of expansion of the oil palm industry is very small relative to the rate of tropical deforestation. The oil palm is highly productive, and can provide a grower with a good income from a smaller area than most other crops, so if oil palm replaces other, less intensive forms of agriculture, pressure on the environment could actually be reduced. Thus where oil palm planting is part of a landscape-level development plan, the crop can play an important role in preserving biodiversity.*

*Soil erosion can be controlled, but needs careful attention. Fossil fuel use is low, but could be reduced still further by using biogas. Pollution is generally low, with the best plantations moving towards 'zero discharge'.*

*In social terms, most oil palm developments provide good living conditions for workers and smallholder growers, but health and safety aspects, and particularly pesticide handling, need more attention. The crop makes an increasingly important contribution to the economy of several countries, and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil aims to ensure that future development is done in a responsible way. The highest standards of social and environmental responsibility must be maintained, and disputes over land ownership must be resolved prior to any development.*

*Agriculturally, the oil palm appears sustainable, in that yields on the same land may continue to rise from one generation to the next. However, labour problems have caused national average yields to stagnate in Malaysia, and unless harvesting can be mechanised the long-term economic viability of the crop may be in doubt. Intensive research to redesign the crop may provide a solution to this problem.*