

The logo for 'MERCY EARTH CHALLENGE' features the words 'MERCY', 'EARTH', and 'CHALLENGE' stacked vertically in a bold, green, sans-serif font. To the right of the text is a colorful, multi-petaled flower-like icon with a small globe at its center. The petals are in shades of green, yellow, orange, blue, and purple. The entire logo is set against a white background with green triangular accents in the top-left and bottom-right corners.

MERCY EARTH CHALLENGE

Palm Oil and the Destruction of Ecosystems

Your lovely island of Madagascar is rich in plant and animal biodiversity, yet this treasure is especially threatened by excessive deforestation, from which some profit. The deterioration of that biodiversity compromises the future of the country and of the earth, our common home. -- Pope Francis, Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corp, Madagascar, September 7, 2019.

Have you had your palm oil yet today? This ubiquitous substance, estimated to be [an ingredient](#) in half the packaged foods on supermarket shelves, hides under [a long list of aliases](#) so it is easy to miss. However, palm oil links us with people thousands of miles away and its production is raising serious environmental concerns.

As we learned last week, fat is a major component of processed foods. [Palm oil](#) has emerged as an ideal fat because it is cheaper to produce than other fats and oils. Palm oil trees, which are native to West Africa but now grow throughout the tropical areas of the world, produce oil from both the fruit and the pit and yield multiple crops each year. For example, it takes a little over half an acre to produce a ton of palm oil, but about ten times as much land to produce the same amount of soybean oil.

As the demand for palm oil increases, large tracts of tropical forests are cleared for palm oil plantations, which harms indigenous communities and ecosystems as you can [see in this video](#). The original foliage is cut down and burned to make way for the new palm trees. What makes this especially devastating environmentally is that these tropical forests [rest on peat bogs](#). [Peat is a material formed by the partial decomposition of

organic matter and it is very rich in carbon. It is a precursor of coal.] When these forests are burned astronomical amounts carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere.

Indonesia and Malaysia are the major sources of palm oil today. However, palm oil plantations are spreading to Africa, Latin America and other parts of Asia. Palm oil plantations are threatening indigenous lands and national parks on the Caribbean coast of Honduras and [palm oil production in Honduras](#) has increased by almost 560 percent over the past twenty years.

In addition to serving as a cheap fat for processed foods, palm oil is also a significant component in many toiletries, cosmetics and other personal care products. It is palm oil that makes soap and shampoo lather. U.S policy is also implicated in the rise of palm oil production. Under pressure from agricultural interests (mainly corn and soybean growers), Congress passed legislation in 2007 requiring fuel producers to mix in soy, palm and other kinds of vegetable oil with diesel fuel and to use ethanol from corn and sugar in gasoline.

Reflection questions

- What is my reaction to this information about palm oil?
- What can I do to become more conscious of the implications of my consumer choices?
- What can I do to impact U.S. policies that have such detrimental impacts on people around the world, particularly communities of color?

ACTION: Install an app on your phone or tablet so you can assess products with palm oil when you go shopping. [This](#) is for Apple products, and [this](#) for other devices. You also can refer to [this list of products](#) certified by the Rainforest Alliance as environmentally and socially sustainable as you consider purchases.