

## Associated Pressâ€™™ impartiality on palm oil questioned

Contributed by Ross Spencer  
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The Associated Press (AP), the American news agency formed in 1846 has had a checkered history filing reports ranging from The Alamo to the Battle of Little Big Horn, to Nazi Germany's surrender to the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York City.

On June 4th 2009, the AP filed a report entitled "Study finds potential profits in conservation", an innocuous enough title, focusing on a study in the current issue of the peer-reviewed journal Conservation Letters, which recommends that selling credits for the billions of tons of carbon that are locked in Indonesia's tropical rain forests could be as profitable as converting these areas into palm oil plantations.

Which is all well and good, except that Michael Casey, the reporter filing the report made the gross mischaracterization that "Plantation companies in Indonesia and Malaysia &mdash; which together produce 87 percent of all palm oil &mdash; have come under fire for leading to deforestation that contributes to the demise of animals like orangutans and Sumatran elephants."

Deforestation Watch has to ask whether Mr Casey had even checked his facts before filing the report, for in tarring Malaysia with the same brush as Indonesia in the manner that he has done betrays a callous disregard for the vastly different planting environment in Malaysia and Indonesia.

First, it is well established that Malaysian planters have been planting mainly on legitimate agricultural land, on old oil palm or rubber estates or on previously logged over areas. To accuse Malaysian planters of having come under fire for deforestation that contributes to the demise of animals like orangutans and Sumatran elephants is reckless reporting and a gross regurgitation of baseless allegations made by self-interested "environmentalists" with a well known propensity for magnification, misrepresentation and fact bending to suit their ends.

First, Malaysia had been the world's largest producer of palm oil for more than a century. Despite this, the country can still boast of 55% forest cover (which is a darn sight larger than the 20% or so forest cover in the countries from which these paragons of environmental virtue hail), which immediately demolishes the "environmentalists" contention that there has been massive deforestation taking place. Even if we take into account the Malaysian State of Sarawak, where the most aggressive percentage of new oil palm plantations are being established, forest cover is still exceeding 79%. How can it be even remotely accurate to allege that deforestation on a scale "that contributes to the demise of animals like orangutans and Sumatran elephants" are taking place, at least in Malaysia?

It is well established too that palm oil is the most sustainable of ALL the oilseed crops with a yield close to 10 times that of its nearest competitors such as soy, rapeseed or sunflower. For instance, palm oil has a typical yield of 4,000 to 5,000 tons per hectare planted which dwarfs the typical yield of 500 tons per hectare for its competitors. What this means is that palm oil requires an extremely small footprint in terms of land use to yield the same unit of edible oil as its competitors.

Also, the oil palm tree, as a full grown tree, has a high leaf index and a productive life of 20-30 years, dispensing with the requirement for annual tilling and replanting that renders it remarkably effective in sequestering CO2 and supporting biodiversity when compared to its closest competitors and other oilseed crops. For example, olive farms are notorious for using too much water or need irrigation; prone to desertification and soil erosion by wind with almost no biodiversity, and thus contribute minimally in combating global warming. The olive plantations are so inferior in environmental sustainability compared to oil palm plantations in Malaysia. Thus it is indeed baffling why palm oil has been singled out for criticism.

The allegations of the impending demise of orang utans due to deforestation caused by palm oil ignores the fact that recent studies appear to show that the orang utan population in the wild which currently is estimated to stand at between 45,000 and 60,000 could actually be growing rather than diminishing. The recent discovery of more than 2,000 previously undiscovered orang utans living in the wilds of Borneo had left many environmentalists red-faced as it confirms the findings that the orang utan population in the wild may not be as threatened as they are made out to be by "environmentalists" and media organizations. Is Ms Gill even aware of the many orang utan conservation initiatives put in place such as the orang utan conservation centres established in Indonesia including those at Tanjung Puting National Park in Central Kalimantan, Kutai in East Kalimantan, Gunung Palung National Park in West Kalimantan, and Bukit Lawang in the Gunung Leuser National Park on the border of Aceh and North Sumatra. In Malaysia,

conservation areas have been set up and they include the Semenggoh Wildlife Centre in Sarawak and Matang Wildlife Centre also in Sarawak, the Sepilok Orang Utan Sanctuary near Sandakan in Sabah and the Orang Utan island, an orang utan conservation and rehabilitation center established at Bulit Merah, Perak. The Malaysian Palm Oil Council had also launched a US\$5 million wildlife conservation fund largely directed at orang utan conservation.

Deforestation Watch is compelled to ask whether it is precisely the extreme productivity of palm oil with the consequent low pricing and growing popularity with food manufacturers and biofuel/biodiesel producers that is at the heart of these anti-palm oil campaigns.

A Malaysian planter, Sime Darby and various other stakeholders in the Malaysian palm oil industry have successfully sequenced the genome for palm oil which augurs well, not only for the industry, but for the environment as well for such a development can only mean even higher yields. This will translate to even greater sustainability and even less land use as some have predicted a doubling and perhaps more in the yield of palm oil once the newly developed strains are planted. Could this signal the doubling of attacks on the palm oil industry? THE END.