SHORT COMMUNICATION

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IS THERE A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR WILDLIFE IN OIL PALM PLANTATIONS IN MALAYSIA?

JAYASILAN MOHD-AZLAN[1]* and LISA LOK[1]

ABSTRACT

The oil palm scene is often highly debated and has been at the centre of controversy in the past decade. Dubbed the 'cash crop', many Third World tropical countries have seized the opportunity to mobilise oil palm at landscape levels to fuel the economy. However, many of these tropical countries are also rich in biodiversity and are home to many endemics and species of conservation importance. While it tackles economic issues like poverty alleviation, it comes at the cost of environmental destruction. Here we take a look at the potential values of forest fragments and wildlife-friendly practices in oil palm landscapes and their roles in conservation in Malaysia. As the demand for oil palm and its products are most likely to continue to grow, there is a need to look at how the relevant stakeholders will sustainably manage the increasing demand while improving biodiversity management.

Keywords: biodiversity, conservation, oil palm, policy, wildlife.

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is the second largest exporter of palm oil globally and the planted areas cover approximately 5.8 million hectares; approximately 17.57% of the total land area in Malaysia (FAO, 2011; MPOB, 2018). Agricultural landscapes are often lacking in biodiversity due to scarcity of resources (*e.g.*, food and shelter) that would usually occur in natural environments (Chazdon *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, not many native species, especially forest specialists, are able to thrive within the monoculture (Edwards *et al.*, 2010; Maddox, 2007; Yap *et al.*, 2010). As such, many recent publications comparing forest species and remnant species in monocultures only provide the extent of species and ecosystem function deficits due to this conversion.

The European Union's introduction of a palm oil biofuel ban, while designed to protect the future of biodiversity and aimed to thwart deforestation of rainforests in the tropics, may instead have dire implications. The ban's effectiveness has also been questioned by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN, 2018), as the move will only increase production of other land-inefficient oil crops to compensate for the loss of market share and maintain existing oil palm plantations, which acts as a displacement rather than a prevention of global biodiversity losses resulting from oil palm. Palm oil-producing countries will find alternative markets and even compensate profit loss by increasing sales to importers such as China, India, and other countries which are not as committed as the European Union to sustainable sourcing. This, in turn, may weaken the implementation of palm oil sustainability certification programmes.

On the 10 June 2019, the Delegated Act was passed by the European Union Parliament to ban and restrict palm oil biofuel imports by 2030 (Ching, 2019). The passing of the Delegated Act disregards the commitments of certification schemes such as the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and the Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) and hampers efforts to ensure that the production of oil palm is as environmentally sustainable as possible. The key issue for biodiversity loss is deforestation, which has now been addressed

[1] Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia.

* *Corresponding author e-mail: azlan@unimas.my*