



Deforestation -- The Dark Side of Europe's Thirst for Green Fuel

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Bio-diesel fuels are helping reduce carbon emissions, but some production of the "green" energy source is contributing to rain forest destruction in Malaysia and Indonesia. NAM contributor Paolo Pontoniere is U.S. correspondent for Focus, Italy's leading monthly.

President George Bush's declaration that Americans are addicted to oil puts the spotlight on the use of alternative and renewable energy sources. But a closer look reveals a dark side to merely tapping so-called green energy sources without resorting to energy conservation. Europe's quest for green fuels is a case in point.

European countries are very proud of the inroads they've made in recent years in reducing their dependence on fossil fuels and their overall carbon emissions. These were achieved mainly through the adoption of green fuels for automotive needs.

More Europeans are using bio-diesel fuels produced by refining vegetable oils. These oils come mainly from processing rapeseed and palm. It is in the refining of palm oil for fuel that the unforeseen dark side to the European desire to go green is revealed.

Critics contend that Europe's path to a greener future is being paved by the rapid destruction of rain forests around the world, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. This destruction in turn is leading to the erosion of natural habitats for many endangered and unique animal species, such as Borneo's orangutan, Sumatra's rhinoceros, tigers, tapirs, gibbons and proboscis monkeys, which live in the forests of Southeast Asia.

A report released at the end of last year by the Friends of the Earth International, an environmental grassroots network active in 70 countries, charged that between 1985 and 2000 the rise of oil-palm plantations accounted for 87 percent of Malaysian deforestation.

During the same period, 6 million hectares of rain forest in Borneo and Sumatra were converted into oil-palm farms. Furthermore, in Borneo and Malaysia an additional 6 million hectares are scheduled for clear-cutting.

In Indonesia the development of new plantations will cause the deforestation of an additional 16.5 million hectares. Every year about 2 million hectares of Indonesian virgin forest, a total area half the size of Belgium, are turned over to palm oil production.



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Experts working for the Ape Alliance and the Orangutan Foundation International interviewed by the British daily the Guardian say 5,000 apes die every year because of oil-palm deforestation. In addition, human rights groups based in the affected areas believe that hundreds of indigenous people have been tortured and maimed for their opposition to the expansion of the plantations into indigenous territory. Friends of the Earth charge that palm planters threaten even the Tanjung Puting national park in Kalimantan, an internationally renowned wildlife sanctuary in Borneo.

Oil palm plantations, 89 percent of which are based in Malaysia and Indonesia, according to the U.K. Food and Drink Federation, generate every year 29 percent of worldwide production of vegetable oil. The Malaysian Star reported that most of Malaysia's palm oil is bound for Europe. The growth of that market compelled last year Malaysia's largest refiner of palm oil, the IOI Group, to expand its operation in Europe, opening a refinery able to process 2,500 to 2,000 tons of palm oil daily near Rotterdam. "Palm oil demand is growing very steadily in Europe and we expect it to continue," Michael Van Sallandt, IOI director for Europe, told Reuters.

This year the European Union will import 4.5 million tons of refined and crude palm oil to satisfy its bio-fuel needs. The EU mandates that 5.75 percent of automotive fuels must come from plants. At the same time, European demand for diesel cars has been growing steadily, currently accounting for 49 percent of the continent's market. Diesel cars are very popular in Belgium (72 percent), France (70 percent), Spain (68 percent), and Austria (66 percent). Many diesel engines can run bio-diesel fuel or a blend of bio-diesel and petroleum-based fuel with few engine modifications.

Experts estimates that palm oil bio-diesel in a few years could account for 20 percent of Europe's automotive consumption and cause the destruction of some of the most valuable and pristine forests of the world. The British government, in a report published last year, recognized that any large-scale expansion of bio-fuel feedstock production would pose huge environmental risks to Brazil and Southeast Asia, where large swaths of undeveloped land are being cleared to make room for feedstock plantations.

Uncritical embrace of green fuels worries Lester Brown, president of the Earth Policy Institute and author of "Plan B 2.0." Brown fears that current feedstock consumption at the gas pump will end up competing with -- and outpacing -- consumption for nutritional purposes. He fears that in the long run, consumption for fuel will not only cause further famine in poor countries, but it will also lead to the desertification of some the most fertile lands of the planet, particularly in Southeast Asia.

"This is another situation in which the brilliant solution of today may become the nightmare of tomorrow," Brown says. "This is true for Indonesia and Malaysia, which are deforesting at a speed never seen before." "This could also be true for the United States, where President Bush proposes to expand bio-fuel programs to include feedstock, and Brazil, which in a few years could see of millions of acres of wasteland." "Europeans should put the problem of their increasing automotive energy consumption in the right perspective," says Tad Patzek, an engineer at the University of California, Berkeley and a fuel expert.

"Thinking that bio-diesel, rather than conservation, can be the answer to the growing need of energy for transportation, is naïve," Patzek cautions. "The reality is that an increasing number of million of hectares of rain forest are being destroyed to feed automotive needs."