



OPINION

Should we really be avoiding palm oil?

It's much more complex than simply cutting it out altogether, says Which? senior researcher, **Aaron West**



Palm oil is so versatile and cheap it's become

ubiquitous. WWF says it's in nearly half of supermarket packaged products – from cosmetics to food. However, it's now so shrouded in controversy that many call for a complete boycott of it.

Palm oil in food products has to be labelled (see p33), but in beauty products it can be hidden in not-so-plain sight, disguised within other ingredients: from something as vague as 'vegetable oil' or as widespread as sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS). Beauty brands don't have to label palm oil at all, misleading for those who are determined not to

support its use because of environmental concerns.

There is no denying that the palm oil industry has flattened vast swathes of rainforest, destroying precious areas of biodiversity and carbon sinks. However the palm oil issue is nuanced.

Stopping its use would cause other, perhaps even greater, problems. It has the highest yield per acre of any oilseed crop, so replacing it with another oil, such as rapeseed or sunflower, would cause even more deforestation. The real solution is to work towards sustainable palm oil.

All the biggest hair care brands (Unilever, L'Oréal UK, John Frieda and Procter & Gamble) are signed up to the Roundtable of Sustainable

Palm Oil (RSPO). This group ensures that members source palm oil in a way that leads to no deforestation, no loss of biodiversity, and which supports communities that financially rely on palm oil farming. While the group has met criticism, many still believe it's the best way towards a sustainable palm oil world.

Ideally brands would label when they are part of the RSPO, just like those that use the Fairtrade label. But until the stigma against palm oil (justified given the industry's past) is gone, brands will avoid it. Until then, if you want to avoid unsustainable palm oil when shopping, check the RSPO website to see if the brand is certified.

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