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Out of sight, out of mind

There has been sporadic media coverage of the environmental problems associated with the South-East Asian palm oil industry due to increasing international demand for vegetable oils. If ever there was a sustainable development challenge to consider as a case study, this is it.

International consumer markets and financiers extend the palm oil industry's chain of custody past the offices of developing country legislators, and timber merchants, to the doors of the remote plantation companies that are employing poor local labour and handling rapid production expansions. Across this highly profitable network of influence hangs a heavy responsibility for habitat and wildlife destruction. The industry's impacts tend to be out of sight, and therefore conveniently out of mind.

But profitable industries also bring opportunity for regional social development and change, provided destructive influences can be brought under control. But can they? Pages 21–23 profile the impact of the palm oil industry in South-East Asia and the recent international Roundtable initiative aimed at engaging the industry's players in commitments to sustainable production.

This includes supermarkets and the manufacturers that supply them. The article considers Australia's role in the demand increase and highlights that palm oil, particularly in food, could be separately flagged beside other 'vegetable oils' – especially given its high saturated fat content and therefore health implications.

Beyond that, it's about appropriate consumer-choice influence over palm oil demand. Similarly, Australian importers and sellers of palm oil products really need to consider subscribing to the new



sustainable production protocols. The major supermarkets in the United Kingdom already have, after active consumer campaigns.

Pages 24–28 consider how the

current financial markets' emphasis on short-term returns is a major hindrance to the longer-term investment needed for innovative sustainable development outcomes. Can this change? With swelling super funds growing in influence by the day, is directing their investment power toward sustainable development just wishful thinking?

As unexpected returns from sustainably focused initiatives begin to be sound financial testimony to the sense of longer, innovative investment horizons, Michael Smith and Charlie Hargroves review some opinions on what needs to happen to both alter 'risk' profiles of potential investments and, therefore, the investment paradigm.

Finally, on pages 12–15 Steve Davidson describes the rise of community-driven initiatives tackling both environmental and social needs. Sustainability priorities are generating a renewed proactive spirit in both rural and urban settings, and the spin-offs are alternative models for addressing local challenges.

Enjoy your reading

James Porteous
Managing Editor



Logan Buell

Next, in issue 133

October–November's issue discusses the mechanisms of social change and the efforts of some prominent social entrepreneurs. The rapid growth of the biofuels industry is also in Focus.