

Coconut Controversy: The Heartbreaking Truth Behind Your Coconut Products

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Humans in southern Thailand capture macaques as young individuals and then train them to be effective coconut pickers. Owned by 89 coconut farmers, 279 chained macaques demonstrated fear or distress during.



Macaque climbing coconut palm tree

Coconut is one of the world's most ubiquitous ingredients, found in everything from food products and cosmetics to biofuel and medicines. It's also being transformed into a fiber for vegan clothing and fashion accessories.^[1] Coconut milk, meanwhile, has long been a popular alternative to animal-based milk; it's even mentioned in *The Mahābhārata*, a Hindu epic that is more than 2,000 years old.^[2]

Botanically, the coconut is a fruit rather than a nut. The tree from which the fruit grows—the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*)—has helped sustain communities for millennia, with the entire plant being used. Coconut meat, the white flesh lining the inside of a coconut, is a source of protein, fiber, iron, potassium, and manganese.^[3]



According to genetic testing carried out in 2011, the coconut originated in India and Southeast Asia.^[4] Some 2,000 years ago, Arab traders brought coconuts from India to East Africa, and they would

eventually introduce coconuts to Europeans. How the word “coconut” was coined is unclear; one account has it that Portuguese colonizers called the fruit “coco-nut” because it resembled a *cocuruto*—head—with three dots like two eyes and a mouth and fibers that look like hair. Coconuts then reached the Americas by way of Europeans, who brought them, along with colonialism and the slave trade, to the Caribbean, where coconut palm trees thrived.^[5]

Today, coconuts are grown around the globe in tropical zones, but most of the top coconut-producing countries in the world are in Asia, including Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Malaysia, and Thailand.^[6] Unfortunately, as with other products in high demand, such as bananas and avocados, coconuts often arrive in the consumer’s hands with a troubling history.

Cruelty-Free Paradox

You may have heard that some restaurants, supermarket chains, and other food outlets have stopped selling certain coconut products. The retail company Target, for example, said it will no longer sell a brand of coconut milk sourced from Thailand due to concerns that it uses highly social monkeys known as pig-tailed macaques to climb the tall trees and pick the bowling ball-sized fruit.^[7] Global retailer Costco pulled the brand from its shelves as well, citing the same concerns.^[8] (The United States is one of the biggest importers of coconuts from Thailand.^{[9][10]})

“Humans in southern Thailand capture macaques as young individuals and then train them to be effective coconut pickers,” writes Agustín Fuentes, a primatologist and professor of biological anthropology at Princeton University, who has studied macaques in Thailand.^[11] Authors of the 2021 report *Assessing the Welfare of Coconut-Harvesting Macaques in Thailand* surveyed 89 coconut farmers who kept a total of 279 macaques and found that most of these animals demonstrated fear or distress during observation. “A majority of macaques showed signs of abnormal repetitive behavior,” they write. “Additionally, the overall mental state of the macaques indicated a largely negative or neutral state, as no behaviours directly indicating a positive mental state were observed.”^[12]



Chained macaque with chain harvesting coconuts

“There is a paradox here, right?” says Avinash Desamangalam, a senior manager at Mordor Intelligence, a company based in India that studies the market for dairy alternatives. Consumers assume that coconut

milk is cruelty-free since it does not come from an animal, but in reality “there is a lot of cruelty involved in terms of using monkey labor,” Desamangalam says.^[13]

While the Thai government rejects claims that monkeys are exploited to harvest coconuts—at least on an industrial scale^[14]—investigations by animal rights campaigners have found widespread abuse, with primates forced to pick coconuts all day with chains around their necks. They’ve found “cruelty to monkeys on every farm, at every monkey-training facility, and in every coconut-picking contest that used monkey labor.”^[15]

Among the abuses that investigators found at Thai coconut farms were monkeys chained to old tires or confined to cages that were barely large enough for them to turn around in. One monkey in a cage on a truck bed was frantically shaking the cage bars in a futile attempt to escape, and a screaming monkey on a rope desperately tried to run away from their handler. In one case, an investigator was told that monkeys would have their canine teeth pulled out if they tried to bite handlers. Investigators also discovered “monkey schools,” where the animals were trained to pick fruit, as well as ride bikes or play basketball for the entertainment of tourists.^[16] A trainer was even caught on camera striking a screaming monkey, dangling him by his tether and collar, and beating him with a chain.^[17]

According to one monkey-training school, a female monkey can pick about 600 coconuts per day, and a male monkey as much as 1,600. Interestingly, this school admits to several of the cruelties listed by investigators, including tethering the animals, keeping them in small cages, and the occasional practice of pulling out their teeth.^[18] (Monkeys used for coconut picking occasionally get their revenge. After being beaten by his handler in 2009, a macaque in Thailand climbed a coconut palm tree and began angrily kicking at the coconuts instead of carefully twisting them off; one fell onto the handler’s head, killing him.^[19] A handler in Malaysia was killed in 1995 when his monkey scaled a tree and threw a coconut at him, breaking his neck.^[20])



Macaque chained to rail

Pig-tailed macaques are supposedly protected under Thailand’s Wildlife Conservation and Protection Act of 2019—under which “owners” of macaques must be officially registered—and the country’s Cruelty Prevention and Welfare of Animal Act of 2014. In practice, however, this legislation offers no specific

regulations regarding captive breeding or environmental requirements (e.g., housing, diet, and activity level for working animals) to own these animals in conditions that promote good welfare.

Harvesting Methods

Researchers believe humans began using monkeys for coconut picking hundreds of years ago in Malaysia and Indonesia, where the practice continues.^[21] Harvesting techniques in countries other than Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand involve humans either climbing the trees themselves and picking the mature fruit, or humans using a long bamboo pole with a scythe affixed at the end. When the pole is not long enough—some coconut palm trees can reach 80 feet tall—they add steel-cored bamboo extensions. They can pick as many as six coconuts with a single cut.^[22]

Another method, practiced by certain producers, especially in the Pacific, is to simply wait until ripened coconuts fall to the ground, where they are collected by the farmers or farm workers.^[23] Finally, another harvesting method is to use a hydraulic lift platform to mechanically elevate a worker to reach the coconuts, although this technique has several limitations, such as only being able to move vertically, not horizontally, and having a long set-up and operating time.^{[24][25]} It's because of the great height the trees grow that humans often exploit monkeys to do this dangerous work. But as well as the abuses already mentioned, macaques kept for coconut-harvesting suffer from not having their species-specific needs met. "These needs, in short, primarily include: the ability to engage in social interactions with conspecifics, to move freely and unrestrained, and housing that provides the ability to hide from stressors," say investigators, who also studied what happened to monkeys who are "retired." When the animals are too old to work, they found, handlers either keep them as pets, sell or give them to others, or simply release them back into the wild; however, some admitted that "they cannot be released into the wild due to a lack in the skills required to forage, defend themselves, and behave normally within a troop."^[26] Perhaps that's one reason that monkeys who have grown too old to pick coconuts and are thus "retired" can sometimes still be found chained on a farmer's property.^[27]

Child Labor

The industry also has a child labor problem. Millions of smallholder farmers are engaged in coconut production in the Philippines, and they often live in remote areas without access to education. Moreover, low wages are persistent across this industry, according to Triple Pundit, which interviewed coconut farmers in the Philippines in 2020. "Coconut farmers very often toil in terrible poverty—as high as 60 percent of them in the Philippines," they write. "There, farmers often make as little as 12 cents per coconut. This is less than \$2 a day."^[28]

As a result, children may be found doing hazardous, unpaid work on coconut farms, says the U.S. Department of Labor.^[29] (It's likely that children are used to harvest coconuts in other countries, but the Department of Labor's *2022 List of Goods by Child Labor or Forced Labor* only mentions the Philippines as being where child labor is found for coconut production.^[30])

Additional Concerns

Although it's the exploitation of macaques that gets most of the negative press surrounding coconuts, monkeys aren't the only animals used by the coconut industry. In a practice known as "cattle under coconuts," many farmers in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India, and small islands in the South Pacific augment their income and improve access to coconut trees by also raising cows and buffaloes for "meat" and dairy.^[31] The system involves having the bovines graze among the groves on grasses that would otherwise grow so tall that they make it difficult to reach the trees for coconut picking. Moreover, it ties animals to the cultivation of coconuts in other ways. As the authors of a study done on

the practice in Sri Lanka put it, “Of the many livestock production systems that exist in Sri Lanka, livestock rearing under coconut plantations is an integral part of the system, and in addition to providing animal products (milk, meat, draught and manure) it also helps in controlling the growth of weeds.”^[32]

Lastly, there are environmental concerns to consider. To help generate more income, many coconut farmers engage in “monocropping”: growing just the one crop year after year on the same parcel of land. This practice eventually depletes nutrients from the soil, which then forces farmers to use chemical fertilizers, which are harmful to the environment. In contrast to monocropping, coconut-based integrated farming, which allows for other agricultural crops to grow under the canopy, could not only improve crop biodiversity and farm productivity but also sequester carbon^[33]—one method of reducing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere with the goal of reducing global climate change.^[34]



“Cattle under coconuts” in Sri Lanka

The popularity of coconut oil has also been cited as a major driver of deforestation, as farmers clear coastal mangrove forests for lucrative coconut palm trees. Mangroves are essential ecosystems for animals, provide natural storm protection along shorelines, and are another storer of carbon (thus tackling climate change). But they are often removed to make way not only for coconut palms but palm oil trees, aquaculture, and other interests.^[35]

Coconut products are often highly processed using industrialized equipment. The process for creating coconut oil, for instance, involves drying the “meat” of coconuts, called copra, and then pressing it to extract the oil. (The oil extracted from copra is rich in lauric acid^[36], which is a key commodity in the preparation of soaps, cosmetics, lauryl alcohol, etc., and thus a profitable product for coconut-producing countries.) The extracted oil is initially brown and contaminated, so it is refined, bleached, and deodorized, frequently using solvents such as n-Hexane^[37]; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention classifies this chemical as a neurotoxin^[38], and the EPA has labeled it a hazardous air pollutant.^[39]

Yet another environmental concern is the greenhouse gas emissions caused when coconuts, which are primarily produced in a limited number of countries, and coconut products are shipped around the world.

When you consider the enormous impact of the dairy industry, however, coconut production has a relatively minor carbon footprint.

What's Being Done?

Coconuts represent a major source of income for coconut-producing countries, and the negative publicity about animal- and human-rights abuses have taken a major financial toll on the industry. They have offered a range of responses, from flat-out denial^[40] to public education and attempts to certify qualifying coconuts as “cruelty free.”

This latter effort may prove beneficial to consumers and coconut growers alike. In 2022, Thailand all but admitted that its coconuts are often picked by macaques when it launched a “Monkey Free Plus” certification program to defend its coconut market, but the program was less than successful.^[41]

So the country then created a certification based on Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), and Thailand’s Department of Agriculture (DOA) fast-tracked the awarding of “GAP Monkey-Free Plus” certificates and logos to companies that supposedly do not use monkeys in the harvesting of coconuts.^[42] The DOA’s director-general, Raphiphat Chantharasriwong, said exporters will receive the GAP Monkey-Free Plus certificates for their coconut products only if they used coconuts from plantations that had received the GAP logo and after the department had verified that the farmers had not used monkeys to pick coconuts. “Every step involved in product processing will be meticulously recorded and easy to trace.

The goal is to provide ultimate assurance to the buyers that no monkeys are being exploited in any step of the coconut picking process,” he said.^[43] (Note: Food Empowerment Project does not endorse any certification programs for commodities, as it’s very difficult to verify “fair” conditions for such products. Please see our page [here](#) for more information.)

Some food companies are addressing the child labor issue as well. It’s a problematic corporation, but Cargill, for instance, asserts on its website that the coconut supply chain in the Philippines is complex, yet they found child labor was higher in areas with weak social and economic infrastructure. “Families in these areas are essentially trapped in a vicious cycle: lack of basic education, inadequate knowledge of good agricultural practices and insufficient means to hire formal laborers.

As a result, children as young as 7 may be at risk of not attending school.” To counter this, the corporation claims, “Cargill and its partners are focusing on raising awareness on the issue across the industry, improving farmer livelihoods through training and designing due diligence systems that will identify, address and remediate child labor.”^[44]

As part of its effort to raise awareness about child labor in the Philippines, meanwhile, the country’s Department of Labor and Employment produced a short, award-winning film called *Pangandoy sa Kalubihan* (“Dream under the coconut trees”), which features a 15-year-old boy who works as a coconut farmer and falls from a tree, losing his right leg.^[45]

As mentioned, the origin of the word “coconut” is uncertain. It might have been created by the Portuguese, but there’s at least one other possibility. According to a 16th-century reference, the denizens of India thought the coconut’s three holes resembled “Monkeys when they cry: which crye the Indians call ‘coca.’” In other words, they named the fruit after an unhappy monkey.^[46]

Recommendations

Coconuts offer many wonderful benefits. They are a nutritious food, for instance, and coconut milk has long been a vegan alternative to animal-based milk. As such, Food Empowerment Project is not suggesting that you avoid all coconut products.

It is believed that certain coconut-growing regions—including India, Brazil, Colombia, and Hawaii—harvest coconuts for export using humane methods such as tractor-mounted hydraulic elevators, willing human tree-climbers, rope or platform systems, or ladders. We consider coconut products from these regions to be better alternatives.

While the environment is certainly a concern, the reality is that many agricultural products have an impact on land, air, water, and workers, and it's sadly not practical to avoid all these foods. The best we can do is be aware of what we are consuming and try to eat foods that use the least resources and have the lowest carbon footprint. F.E.P. believes that a vegan diet is a major step in caring for the planet and that coconuts do not cause significant harm to the environment, especially when compared with animal-based foods.

Notes

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