

Palm Oil in Common Household Products Is Destroying the World's 'Orangutan Capital'
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The health of the Leuser Ecosystem's Singkil-Bengkung landscape is internationally significant because its deep, [carbon-rich peatlands](#) are among Earth's most valuable and effective natural carbon sinks. Conversely, when drained, cleared, and burned for conversion to palm oil plantations, this soil type is transformed into a [carbon bomb](#) that emits catastrophic pollution levels into the atmosphere.



Buyer beware: Illegal deforestation to make room for palm oil plantations in Sumatra is destroying critical habitat for endangered orangutans. The oil is used in 50 percent of all consumer goods, from lipstick and packaged food to body lotion, biofuels, and snack foods. (Photo: Laurel Sutherlin)

Introduction: The Leuser Ecosystem

Picture a rhinoceros in the rainforest. Add a herd of elephants, families of orangutans swinging through the treetops, and tigers prowling the understory, and there is only one place in the world you could be.

Indonesia's [Leuser Ecosystem](#) is one of Earth's most ancient forest ecosystems, a laboratory of life's potential where the alchemy of evolution has been allowed to experiment uninterrupted for millennia. And the results are astounding. Green upon green, vines hanging from towering old-growth trees, moss growing on ferns and bromeliads... you get the picture.

It is the kind of place one imagines primeval nature to be: wild, abundant, and impenetrable. The Leuser Ecosystem is considered the heart of Southeast Asia's rainforest region, which, alongside the Amazon in South America and the Congo Basin in Africa, is one of only three tropical forest regions on Earth.



A critically endangered Sumatran rhino moves under the forest canopy, September 23, 2016. Large tracts of forest in Indonesia continue to be cleared for palm oil expansion, pushing many species of wildlife towards extinction. (Photo: Paul Hilton for RAN/SRS)

The beating heart of the Leuser is the lowland forests and peat swamps of the Singkil-Bengkung region. This area is part of western Sumatra’s last healthy peat swamp ecosystem. This lush jungle contains some of the world’s **richest** levels of biological diversity.

The lowland peat forests of the Leuser Ecosystem deserve the highest levels of protection for multiple critical reasons. Dubbed the “**orangutan capital of the world**,” this region has the highest population density of critically endangered Sumatran orangutans anywhere. This includes a unique, culturally distinct **subpopulation** of a few thousand individuals in the Singkil-Bengkung region. These subpopulations demonstrate social structures and tool-using behaviors distinct from all other orangutan populations. These forests are also home to some of the healthiest remaining breeding populations of highly imperiled Sumatran elephants, rhinos, and tigers.

Cycle of Destruction



The Conflict Palm Oil cycle of destruction. (Credit: Rainforest Action Network)

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With [more than a century of proud conservation history](#) responsible for its continued existence, the province of Aceh where the Leuser resides is, against all odds, a sparkling ecological jewel standing in stark contrast to the devastated landscape surrounding it. Most of the rest of Sumatra—once known as Indonesia’s “[Emerald of the Equator](#)”—and sadly, much of the rest of lowland rainforests across Indonesia, too, have been [exploited](#) and denuded by wave after wave of scorched-earth policy, industry, colonial extraction, and modern-day corrupt corporate greed. What has already been lost is incalculable, but in this unique ecosystem, there remains a rare opportunity to stop the cycle of destruction and protect a globally valuable treasure before it’s too late.



Aerial shot showing illegal forest conversion, including peatland drainage and deforestation to make room for a palm oil plantation inside Singkil Swamp Nature Reserve, Iemeudama village, Trumon district, south of Aceh. (Photo: Nanang Sujana)

Hundreds of thousands of people rely on the area’s rich natural resources as the basis of their livelihoods. Downstream villages are [already suffering](#) severe, sometimes deadly threats from devastating floods, landslides, and the loss of subsistence resources like fish and forest products as a direct result of the rapid rates of deforestation caused by palm oil. Communities also continue to suffer due to the loss of access to their customary [lands, which palm oil companies took](#) without their consent, and due to [failures of the government to take decisive action](#) to resolve conflicts and restore the rights of communities to their lands.

The Acehnese people have fought for over a century to protect the integrity of the Leuser Ecosystem’s extraordinary forests, and the region has become internationally famous for its intact expanses of verdant trees and its stunning wealth of imperiled wildlife species. In the decade between 2009 and 2019, [more than 18,000 hectares of forests](#) within the Singkil-Bengkung region were cleared, leaving roughly [250,000 hectares](#) of rainforest. This area continues to [decrease yearly](#) due to deforestation and the drainage of peatlands.

In 2022, for example, the reserve [lost](#) 700 hectares of primary peat swamp forest (twice the area of New York’s Central Park), revealed a [study](#) by forest loss monitoring platform, TheTreeMap; in the first half of 2023 alone, there was a loss of 372 hectares, according to an [analysis](#) by Aceh-based environmental NGO Forest, Nature, and Environment Aceh (HAKA). New canals being [built](#) indicate plans for further deforestation and illegal palm oil planting.

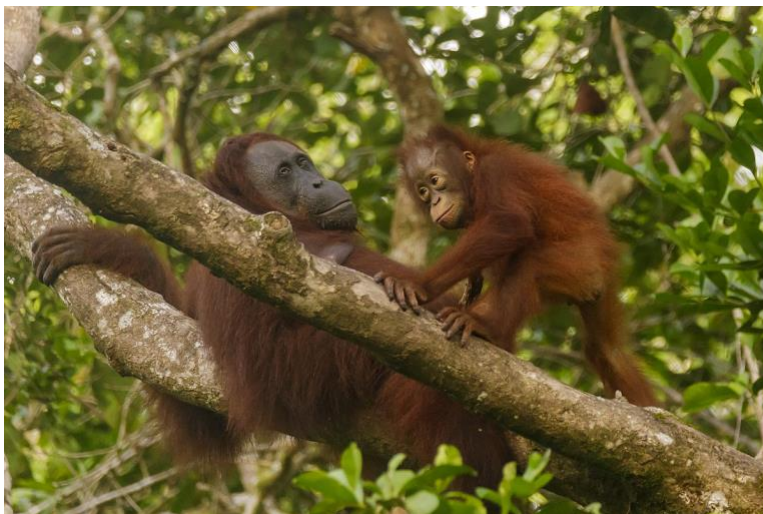
Undercover Field Investigations

In 2019, my organization, Rainforest Action Network (RAN), conducted a series of [undercover investigations](#) due to the alarming destruction of peat forests within the lowland rainforests of the Leuser Ecosystem. The field research was conducted to determine if the forest clearance was being driven by major snack food brands, even though they had adopted policies years ago to end deforestation in their supply chains.

Tragically, our investigations exposed major global brands—including Procter and Gamble, Unilever, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Mondelēz, and Nissin Foods—sourcing illegal palm oil grown within the nationally protected Rawa Singkil Wildlife Reserve. In September 2022, we published the [Carbon Bomb Scandals report](#), showing that the same brands were still sourcing illegal palm oil from the reserve.

The [investigations](#) and the [2022 Carbon Bomb Scandals report](#) were definitive. Palm oil is being grown illegally inside the nationally protected Rawa Singkil Wildlife Reserve, and it is being sold to mills that provide the palm oil used to manufacture snack foods sold across the world by Procter and Gamble, Unilever, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Mondelēz, and Nissin Foods.

These mills are located immediately next to areas of illegal encroachment within the Leuser Ecosystem, and they lack the necessary procedures to trace the location where the palm oil they sell is grown, an essential requirement for [complying](#) with the No Deforestation, No Peatlands, No Exploitation policies to which [all of these brands have publicly committed](#).



Bornean orangutan (Pongo pygmaeus), Tanjung Putting National Park

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Some Progress, but More Is Needed

Progress has been made by some companies that have taken steps toward implementing their No Deforestation policies. Brands like [Unilever](#) and [Nestlé](#), for example, have begun the process of increasing supply chain transparency by publishing the mills they source from. A minority of corporations have achieved traceability to the plantation level (Unilever has outlined its strategies to [identify plantations](#) supplying its mills, for example), but most companies remain unable to offer certainty as to exactly where the palm oil they consume is grown.

[RAN's Keep Forests Standing 2023 Scorecard](#) evaluated and ranked a group of 10 influential global brands, each with public 'No Deforestation' policy commitments, and the evidence clearly shows that paper promises are not enough to keep the forests from falling.

The Leuser Ecosystem at large, particularly the Singkil-Bengkung region, still offers a rare and fleeting opportunity to get it right and avoid the devastating mistakes made throughout so much of Indonesia in the past. It remains possible here to prevent the destruction of habitat that drives iconic wildlife species toward extinction, to avert human suffering from inevitable [floods and landslides caused by deforestation](#), and to end the reckless [burning of carbon-filled peatlands](#) contributing to the climate crisis.

The [international attention](#) resulting from the release of our [2019 report](#) has helped pressure [brands to respond and take further action](#). However, the high stakes and urgent threats to the Singkil-Bengkung demand more bold and decisive action to ensure the area receives permanent protection.