

Lesson 4: Resource Sheet 1

Indonesian deforestation

In Kalimantan, deep in the rainforests of Indonesian Borneo, illegal fires rage, spreading smoke as far as Malaysia and Singapore.

These fires are driven by the world's rapidly growing demand for palm oil, which is used in half of all supermarket products, from chocolates to shampoo. Despite its environmental impacts the oil palm industry thrives because of the money it generates. For farmers, the production of palm oil offers a better way of life. They afford to buy things such as televisions and refrigerators. The money earned from oil palm is four times greater than is possible from the growing of rice or the production of rubber.

To cash in on the palm oil boom, farmers are clearing land the fastest way they know, by burning. (See Figures 1 and 2). But they are not only burning the forest, they are also destroying the peatlands that lie beneath it. These peatlands are one of the world's largest stores of carbon.

Figure 1: Burning rainforest, Indonesian Borneo=



Figure 2: Palm oil plantation on land cleared of its rainforest



Without humans setting fire to the landscape, forest fires in Borneo were very rare events. Peat, which is made up of partially decaying plant material, acts like a giant sponge, soaking up water during the monsoon and staying damp to prevent fires during the dry season.

What is lost on those setting fire to the forest is an understanding of their importance. The forests are home to 15,000 species of plants, 420 types of bird and 222 mammals, many of which are only found in Borneo. The forest is home to pygmy elephants, clouded leopards, sun bears, mouse deer, flying fox bats, pangolins and the Bornean orangutan. The orangutan is now one of the most critically endangered species on earth. Just 50,000 live in the wild. (See Figure 3).

Like the rainforests of the Amazon Basin, the forests of Borneo have been badly affected by the warming of the planet. The frequency and intensity of fire have increased even though the vast majority of these blazes have been deliberately lit. Like the deforestation taking place in the Amazon, the loss of forest cover reduces the environment's capacity to store carbon and produce oxygen.

Figure 3: Bornean orangutan mother with young

