

PALM OIL INDUSTRY

MISCONCEPTION THE REAL PROBLEM

WHAT is it about the palm oil industry that many — except for those working in the industry — are hellbent on discrediting it?

There are three underlying reasons, all of which are inextricably linked to palm oil industry misconceptions and need to be corrected.

FIRST, that it causes 300 football fields worth of rainforest to be cleared every hour to make space for oil palm plantations.

This accusation has been around for a very long time. A simple calculation will debunk this misconception.

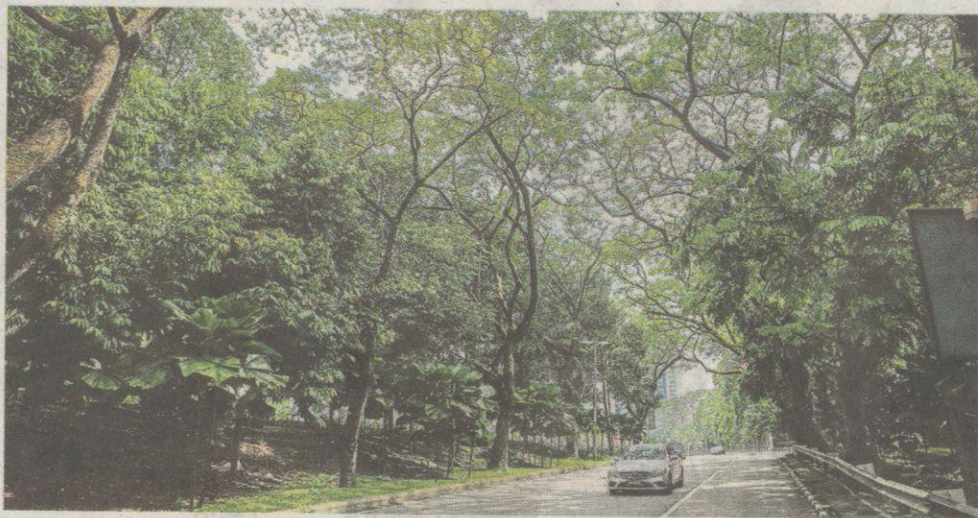
According to the Union of European Football Associations stadium categories, the pitch size of a top category stadium is 105m long by 68m wide.

Three hundred football fields are therefore equivalent to 2.14 million sq m. If the accusation is true, then Malaysia, a country with a total land area of around 329,847 million sq m, is in grave danger of disappearing in just 18 years.

In reality, despite the rapid expansion of palm oil since the 1960s, Malaysia, the world's second largest producer, still has a forest cover of 55.3 per cent.

This is aligned with its commitment to maintain a natural forest cover of over 50 per cent of its total land mass (pledged at the 1992 UN Rio Earth Summit).

Also worth noting is our forest area per capita, of 7,145 sq m, is higher than the world's average, even compared with Holland and United Kingdom.



More than half of Malaysia is green, proof that the palm oil industry suffers from misconceptions.

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SECONDLY, the misconception that palm oil leads to the extinction of the orangutan.

The latest estimate suggests there could be a loss of over 60 per cent Bornean orangutans in just 60 years.

The decline is often linked to habitat loss due to the expansion of the palm oil industry but many ignore the fact that it could also have been caused by logging, conversion of forest to timber estates, illegal hunting and the pet trade.

Liverpool John Moores University in the UK found that habitat loss to due plantations and logging accounted for only 10 per cent of the decline. People deliberately killing orangutans are the main cause.

To improve biodiversity and con-

serve wildlife, the Malaysian Palm Oil Council launched the Malaysian Palm Oil Wildlife Conservation Fund in 2006.

Several programmes have already been initiated, including the Wildlife Rescue Unit, which ensures the long-term survival of orangutans. Until 2017, it carried out over 500 rescue and translocation operations, which included 52 Bornean orangutans.

The third accusation is that palm oil is produced unsustainably

Palm oil is the cheapest edible oil, giving it a competitive advantage over other oils and fats.

People tend to believe that sustainable products are more expensive to buy, also because they are more expensive to create.

This is not the case. Palm oil is cheap because it is the most efficient oil seed crop in the world, generating approximately eight times more oil than that of soybean.

To produce the same volume of vegetable oil, oil palm only need one-eighth of the land area required by soybean. In addition, oil palm can produce oil all year round.

To top it off, palm oil has the most sustainable standards. The first was introduced at the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil in 2004.

This was followed by Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil in 2013, demonstrating that our palm oil industry is taking the steps necessary to improve sustainability performance.

Sustainable development for the environment, human welfare and economics. Many fail to appreciate that the Malaysian palm oil industry fits this paradigm well.

Palm oil is the top 10 largest export earner for Malaysia for the past decade. In 2021, palm oil and its based manufactured products contributed RM97 billion to the country, equivalent to 7.8 per cent of export values. It ranked third after electronic and petroleum products.

Furthermore, the Malaysian palm oil industry has helped to lift many people out of poverty by providing more than 3 million direct and indirect employment opportunities, and nearly 500,000 smallholders are involved in this business.

The Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) Taib Andak scheme, introduced in the 1960s, provides other evidence that oil palm planting smallholders' poverty has been eradicated.

It has since been acknowledged by the World Bank as a successful model of poverty alleviation for developing countries.

There might be isolated problems with the Malaysian palm oil industry, but it would be unproductive to discredit the entire industry. Instead, individual problems should be dealt in accordance with the law.

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