

Soy You Wanna Be an Environmentalist?

Does the rise of soy mean the fall of the Amazon?

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It wasn't so long ago that a portion of the fast-food-consuming population—we'll call them the "green meat-eaters"—were boycotting McDonalds and the likes because they didn't want a McMeal raised from the ashes of the Amazon. Recent reports suggest that despite the actions of the green meat-eaters, cattle feed—particularly soy—is still behind the axe. Soy agriculture is on the rise in Brazil and will continue to destroy invaluable forest land without immediate and direct consumer education and action.

Today, agriculture is the largest factor feeding the fire of Amazon destruction—and soy is the leading crop culprit. Brazilian soy exports rose 322 % between 1995 and 2001. Currently, Brazil's soy production has been estimated at over 50 million tons per year, with an area under cultivation of over 20 million hectares.

The vast majority of Brazilian soy exports go to Europe and China, where high-protein soya, used principally as animal feed, is in high demand. A recent report by Greenpeace linked Brazilian soy to McDonald's chicken nuggets and other food products in Europe, notably England and the Netherlands.

A related report claims that the soy arriving in European ports is a result of "criminal agriculture." John Buchanan of Conservation International spoke of such crimes in a TFG phone interview, stating that soy production in Brazil would not be problematic if suppliers followed basic Brazilian laws. Soy-producing conglomerates, like Cargill, practice illegal agriculture and forestry methods despite governmental awareness of their crimes.

These criminal actions will continue as long as there is consumer tolerance for products linked to losses in the Amazon. Which made us wonder: how is this affecting US soy products—those that many people turn to in order to avoid meat products? TFG recently contacted Gardenburger, a popular brand of meatless burgers, to ask where the soy in their non-burgers originated. The best answer anyone from Gardenburger could give us—and we talked to a lot of people—was a sorry, "Our soy comes from a plant in Illinois." TFG also contacted Silk, makers of the soy milk of choice for Starbucks. They were much more helpful: Silk's soymilk generally comes from the US, but because of the 2003 draught, they began importing soy from Brazil, Argentina and China. The Silk spokesperson said that they ensure that "no rainforest is damaged in the growth or production" of their soybeans, but they couldn't elaborate on how they ensure this; in our minds, that leaves an all too wide margin of error. Silk's response was encouraging—at least they're aware of the problem—but not altogether settling. Is it possible that vigilant vegetarians and liberal latte drinkers are unwittingly driving bulldozers in Brazil? The

answer, as far as TFG has found, is that it's possible. And that possibility, however slight, should be enough to ruffle the feathers of any card-carrying tree-hugger.

In today's global economy, the adage, "You are what you eat" has a lot of weight. Soy clearly has its benefits. It's an important protein source, especially for vegetarians and for millions of people who can't afford the luxury of meat. Soy is undoubtedly kinder and gentler on the planet as a whole than industrial meat. And like any other commodity, it produces economic benefits for growers and traders. But soy may not be the 'magic green bean' of eco-lore. Just like real estate, the most important factor for soy's sustainability is: location, location, location.

And that's where you, the consumer, have a tremendous amount of power. The rise of soy doesn't have to mean the fall of the Amazon. An ounce of effort from each of us could pressure companies to get their facts straight and get their soy from sustainable suppliers. Begin by asking questions. Vegetarians, ask soy-based food companies you support if any of their soy may come from 'areas-previously-known-as-tropical-forests.' Omnivores, ask your butcher or burger flipper where your meat comes from, and whether the animal's feed might spring from forests that were turned into fields. Be persistent: make sure companies give you assurance (and some evidence to back it up) that they don't source soy from tropical forests. And if you're not 100% satisfied, tell the company you'll be switching brands or starting a lemon juice diet. Please tell your friends what you learn and encourage them to get active. If enough people raise their voices, together we can make a difference. Better yet, tell us, too. Drop TFG an email (info@tropicalforestgroup.org) with what you find out. We'll keep track of who's naughty and who's nice, so please stay tuned. Thanks for taking a bite out of Amazonian deforestation...