

Court Decision Shatters The Independent's Palm Oil Story?

The Independent has had a tumultuous past few weeks. Exposed in late April 2009 as a newspaper with plunging circulation and with its parent company, The Independent News and Media in dire danger of defaulting on a 200 Million Euro bond, the newspaper, interestingly, launched a broadside against palm oil on Mayday 2009.

Rolling out the now boring mantra of palm oil causing massive deforestation, threatening the extinction of the orang utan and displacing native people, the paper published a series of "reports" trundling out these well worn equivocations and half-truths as the gospel truth! Unfortunately for The Independent, it made an extraordinary Freudian slip as to the real motive behind its "report" when it pointed out that "all this comes amid a surge in demand for the world's cheapest cooking oil!"

Enough evidence has been proffered by this site as to the veracity of the "report", in particular the allegations of deforestation and impending orang utan extinction which have both been exposed as patently untrue.

For one, palm oil is clearly far and away, the most sustainable of oilseed crops. Blessed with exceptional productivity, palm oil enjoys an enviable yield of 4.5 metric tons per hectare planted which dwarfs its nearest competitors, such as soy, canola and sunflower which typical has a yield of 0.5 metric tons per hectare. Even the uninitiated can surmise that this means that palm oil requires far LESS land than its competitors to produce the same unit of edible oil.

This explains why Malaysia, which was erstwhile, the largest producer of palm oil, has cultivated the crop for more than a hundred years and STILL can boast forest cover exceeding 55% (the UK where The Independent is based, pales by comparison in its permanent forest cover which currently stands at less than 11%)!

Moreover, oil palm cultivation in Malaysia represents only 0.09% of the world agricultural area. In the view of Deforestation Watch, surely such allegations of deforestation and climate change caused by palm oil ring hollow when critics such as The Independent conveniently remains silent on the 99.91% cultivated land in the rest of the world. The question has to be asked whether this is due to the fact that most of these 99.91% agricultural land resides in the developed economies from which these critics hail?

The allegation of palm oil endangering the orang utan to the extent of threatening their extinction certainly takes credulity to a new low. For The Independent to allege that the orang utan could become extinct in less than 10 years smacks OF RECKLESS JOURNALISM. It raises the question whether The Independent has done any fact checking as the orang utan population in the wild in Borneo is currently estimated at between 45,000 and 69,000, it behooves one to ask just how is it even remotely possible for the orang utan, by any leap of logic to be facing extinction. Rather than dwindling, there is evidence that the orang utan population in the wild is actually growing! The recent discovery of more than 2,000 wild orang utans by scientists in Indonesian Borneo has left many environmentalists red faced, especially RAN which had predicted that the orang utan would go extinct by 2011 (in 2 year's time). The new find could well add 5 percent to the world's known orangutan numbers, said Erik Meijaard, senior ecologist for the Nature Conservancy in Indonesia.

Orang Utan conservation efforts have been initiated for some years now with many conservation programs and orang utan enclaves established by Malaysia and Indonesia. Orang utan conservation centres had been established in Indonesia including those at Tanjung Puting National Park in Central Kalimantan, Kutai in East Kalimantan, Gunung Palung National Park in West Kalimantan, and Bukit Lawang in the Gunung Leuser National Park on the border of Aceh and North Sumatra. In Malaysia, conservation areas have been set up and they include the Semenggoh Wildlife Centre in Sarawak and Matang Wildlife Centre also in Sarawak, and the Sepilok Orang Utan Sanctuary near Sandakan in Sabah.

As to the displacement of native peoples, the recent ruling by Malaysia's highest court affirming the land rights of indigenous people exposes the lie that native people are being displaced with impunity.

A panel of three Federal Court judges unanimously ruled that tribes have customary ownership of land they have lived on for generations and state governments cannot take it from them without compensation, said See Chee How, a prominent land rights lawyer.

"It is a landmark decision," said See of Tuesday's ruling. "It's the first time the Federal Court has affirmed (such) a decision." See said he hoped this would bode well for more than 100 other land rights cases still pending in court. The tribes, who mostly live in poor settlements in the jungles on Borneo island, argue that the land is theirs because they have lived on it for generations. In 2007 the Federal Court ruled that a family of the Kedayan group in Sarawak state on Borneo had rights over land they used and that they should be compensated. The government had taken over the land in the 1990s to grant it for oil exploration.

The state government sought a final review of the decision in the more-than-decade-old case, but on Tuesday another Federal Court panel upheld the ruling in favor of the family.

Last year in an unprecedented move, the Malaysian government said it would grant ownership of farming land to about 20,000 indigenous families to improve their lives.

In the view of Deforestation watch, ethical behaviour in journalism can be distilled into a simple injunction - it is simply that papers like The Independent, before publication of their series of reports on matters such as that of palm oil and deforestation which is highly controversial and hotly contested, should take the trouble to verify their facts and sources and strive to give both sides of the story. By failing to do so, The Independent has taken incredulity to a new high and credulity to a new low!

In fact, the timing of their "palm oil reports" coming on the heels of their well publicized sharp decline in circulation and the dire financial straits faced by its parent company raises legitimate questions pertaining to its journalistic integrity! THE

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