

Fair Trade and the Environment

Traditional Farming

Cocoa, coffee, bananas and other crops are grown on “understory” trees that originated in Latin American and African rainforests. When grown beneath a diverse cover of shade trees, which is the traditional method, these plants provide habitat for wildlife such as birds, butterflies, insects, and animals. Traditional farmers generally use sustainable agricultural techniques including composting, rotating crops, and not applying expensive chemicals and fertilizers. In addition, they typically cultivate cocoa and coffee alongside other plants such as banana and nut trees that provide food for the farmers’ families as well as additional sources of income.

Industrial Farming—Deforestation

To meet the world’s growing demand for tropical crops, high yield sun-grown hybrids were developed during the “Green Revolution” in the 1970’s. Sun cultivation involves clear cutting, resulting in significant deforestation of pristine rainforests in Latin America and Africa. The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center has identified deforestation from intensive coffee farming as one of the major threats to songbirds in the western hemisphere. The Sierra Club reported 15% of the Ivory Coast’s rainforests had been deforested for cocoa production by 2000. Sun cultivation is also associated with single-cropping or “monoculture,” removing the biodiversity needed to sustain plant and animal life, and threatening local food security.

Industrial Farming—Pesticide and Fertilizer Pollution

Industrial farming also require large amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which poison local air and water. This has put local animal populations and those who live and work in the community at the risk of being exposed to dangerous levels of these compounds. DDT, an insecticide that affects the nervous system, liver, and kidneys, was banned in the US in 1972 but is still used widely in coffee cultivation. On top of this, pesticides use is actually increasing the problems they were designed to control. In 1998, the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute concluded that the overuse of pesticides in cacao cultivation had actually encouraged the development of more virulent strains of pests and diseases. This has forced farmers to abandon their farms after

only a few years and move on to a new area of the rainforest to start the cycle of catastrophe all over again.

Genetic Modification

Action Aid in the UK reported industry research to develop GMO coffee that can be ripened all at once, increasing yield and decreasing labor costs. Widespread application of GMO coffee are poised to change coffee production fundamentally, at the risk of putting millions of small farmers out of business.

Shade-grown & Organic Farming

There is good news: Agriculture can be beneficial if done properly. Sustainability is in fact the traditional way of family for small-scale producers. The World Watch Institute noted that traditional cacao farming could bring the damaged Brazilian rainforest back to its richly diverse natural state. In addition, because traditional methods allow for more room between plants, they naturally minimize the spread of the common diseases that bring farmers to use chemical pesticides. As for the many species that thrive in the shady rainforest, Jeff Parrish of the Nature Conservancy stated

that “Cacao habitats can harbor high species richness equal to or even surpassing that of forest. Although cacao should not replace forest, as many bird species can only survive within large intact tracts of forest habitat, cacao has been shown to clearly supplement forest habitat and enhance the survival of threatened species in an increasingly fragmented landscape. Since cacao can buffer national parks and reserves from more damaging practices, it serves as a mutually beneficial land use for both farmers and conservationists alike.” The same is true for coffee.

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Organic and Shade-grown Certification

Many small-scale farmers still use traditional methods, growing their crop organically under a shade canopy. These farmers benefit not only by having cleaner air and water, but may receive better revenues because organic products yield a higher price than conventional ones. Thanks to the involvement of several certification organization and increasing consumer demand, environmentally sustainable products are becoming easier



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to identify and more widely available in the US. Organic products are certified in the US by organizations approved by the USDA. "Bird-friendly" or shade-grown products bear the seal of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center or the Rainforest Alliance. Support sustainable practices and the farmers who use them by looking for these labels on Fair Trade Certified products.

Fair Trade certification and sustainability

It is important to remember that Fair Trade, shade-grown, and organic mean different things, even though they share some of the same criteria or may make similar claims. Sustainable farming is the traditional route for the small farmers who make up Fair Trade co-ops because they tend to be the best stewards of the land and possess the highest interest in keeping the natural environment healthy for their families and future generations. In addition, small farmers typically do not have the money to cut down forests or purchase large amounts of chemicals.

Although Fair Trade criteria do not mandate organic and shade grown methods, several aspects of the Fair Trade system support sustainable production and farmers are actively encouraged to seek organic certification. Fair Trade criteria ban certain pesticides and require the use of integrated crop management, where organic methods of pest/disease control and fertilization are emphasized over chemical ones. Fair Trade cooperatives are also required to set aside revenues for technical workshops, which often address the benefits and proper use of sustainable techniques and thus promote their increased use. As a result, most Fair Trade Certified products are shade grown and either passive or certified organic. To be sure, look for the organic and shade-grown labels on Fair Trade products!

One key difference between Fair Trade and eco-friendly labels is that only Fair Trade guarantees that producers receive the stable, minimum price they need. Some certified organic products are purchased from Fair Trade cooperatives, but unless a product is Fair Trade Certified, there is no guarantee that the farmer received the benefit or that adequate prices will continue. In the Fair

Trade system, farmer cooperatives are paid directly and receive a minimum price per pound. Fair Trade cooperatives receive a higher price for organic than non-organic, representing another incentive for organic production in the Fair Trade system.

Fair Trade farmers speak about sustainability

Fair Trade farmers realize both the environmental and economic benefits of using organic methods. Cayetano Ico, chairman and farmer from the TCGA cooperative in Belize stated: "Our objectives for the next years are to ... promote production of organic cocoa among our members, to promote education and awareness concerning the ecosystem and to diversify production. We still need to learn a lot and gain experience in trading and marketing. Fairtrade gives us this possibility."

Paying farmers a fair wage and offering incentives for ecological practices is the best way to encourage sustainable farming. Organic and shade-grown labels have made important contributions in promoting sustainable techniques that

benefit farmers, the environment, and consumers. However, we still need to ensure that the benefits reach the farmer as well as consumers and the environment. Fair Trade guarantees this. Consumers who want to do what is good for workers, trees, birds, and our shared environment can buy products that are multiply certified: Fair Trade, Organic and Shade Grown.

Get involved & learn more!

Global Exchange Fair Trade Campaigns
415-255-7296, fairtrade@globalexchange.org
www.globalexchange.org

Organic Consumers Association
www.organicconsumers.org

Rainforest Alliance
www.rainforest-alliance.org

Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center
www.si.edu/smbc

Where to find Fair Trade Products
TransFair USA www.fairtradecertified.org
Fair Trade Federation www.fairtradefederation.com



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