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“Solidarity in a competing world —
fair use of resources”

Oil-Palm: An Amazing Plant as Reforestation Driver in the Tropics Despite its Evil Reputation

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Abstract

Oil-palm suffers from negative perception in northern countries as a driver of deforestation in humid lowland tropics. Its „evil“ reputation is also emphasised by vegetable oil industries of temperate countries, whom see a formidable competitor in palm oil. While the connection between oil-palm and deforestation currently is undeniable, same will apply to any crop that allows „quick money“ schemes in rainforest areas.

A close look at *Elaeis guineensis* reveals an amazing plant with extremely high oil per hectare yields compared to other oil crops. It is a perennial with strong natural resistances, loves associations with N-fixing leguminosae, flowering vegetation, even allows multi-cropping. It requires little crop protection chemicals and is a great provider of employment. Its impressive capacity for biomass accumulation and high evapotranspiration rates help cool surrounding air and stabilise receding yearly rainfalls. It is an excellent crop for high rainfall tropical soils. Under these considerations oil-palm is more sustainable than many tropical crops like bananas, soya, rice, maniok or any short-cycle field-crop, cattle farming, pineapple, maracuja, etc.

It is claimed that oil-palm cropping can be transformed into a reforestation driver, underpinning a surplus oriented industry that can generate foreign exchange. Enough rainforests have been cut down to provide ample space for agricultural activities and even return some areas to reforested states. When cultivated in transition belts between rainforests and deforested agricultural land, intelligently managed, species-diverse oil-palm plantations can serve as „pseudo forests“, stabilising rainfall and preventing soil erosion. Areas between forests and the oil-palm plantations can be reforested actively and will benefit from the climate effects of the plantations. After a 20 year cycle the oil palm plantation can be given up and the area further reforested, starting new cycles further away from the forest.

This suggestion will only work with novel „land lease“ strategies, where ownership of the land remains with the state, being only leased out in small, medium or even large plots to farmers for defined periods. Existing rainforests must be strict „no-go“ areas under severe and effective penalties. Key infrastructure is provided centralised by government contractor companies (like road access and irrigation).

Keywords: Land lease, oil-palm, reforestation, sustainable cropping