

# Supplying the Demand for a Livable Planet

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• Rainforest Alliance



**P**aper, coffee, chocolate, bananas, beef, cut flowers, fruit—the prices of such everyday products, high as they are, still don't reveal their environmental or social costs. Often, producing these and many other things we consume daily degrades the environment, threatens ecosystems, pollutes drinking water and endangers workers.

It's important we tune into this. How we manage the production, consumption and renewal of natural resources determines the social condition of billions of people, the environmental condition of the planet and our collective future.

## Cultivating Conservation on Farms

The principal agent of ecosystem destruction and species extinction is not smokestacks or tailpipes; it's agriculture. Farming has the largest environmental impact of any industry. Occupying 38 percent of the Earth's land area, agriculture uses more fresh water, and affects more of the planet's surface, than any other single human activity.

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Agriculture is one of the leading causes of climate change, responsible for 14 percent of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from soil erosion, poor irrigation practices, the uncontrolled use of fertilizers and other agrochemicals, biomass burning and livestock production.<sup>1</sup> And it's a main driver of clearing forests. When deforestation from farmland expansion and tree plantations is factored into calculations, some 30 percent of global GHG emissions are coming from agriculture today.<sup>2</sup>

But it's not as though we can just stop farming, or do with less of it. We have to find ways to farm sustainably. Sustainability certification is a powerful way to convert global agriculture's negative impacts to positive ones. Rainforest Alliance Certified™, USDA Organic, Sustainable Agriculture Network, Marine Stewardship Council and Forest Stewardship Council are just a few examples of voluntary, independent programs that use the power of markets and certification standards to guide farmers toward sustainable farm management and provide an accountable way to evaluate social and environmental improvements.

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The agricultural products we use the most—including coffee, bananas, cocoa and many others—tend to be the ones with the largest environmental and social footprints. They also offer some of the largest opportunities for certification programs to turn their impacts into positive ones by converting production to environmentally and socially sustainable practices.

Coffee is a perfect example. In the 1970s, agronomists began promoting a new coffee farming system, where the sheltering forest trees are cleared and coffee bushes are packed in dense hedgerows and doused with agrochemicals. Monoculture farming produces more beans but eliminates wildlife habitats, promotes forest destruction and soil erosion and pollutes streams.

Coffee is the second largest global commodity after oil, and it has an enormous environmental, social and economic footprint. Coffee is farmed on 30 million



### Environmental Impacts:

- Monoculture systems clear forests and replace them with densely packed crop plants, doused with agrochemicals.
- Eliminates wildlife habitats; promotes forest destruction, soil erosion, pollution

### Opportunity for Sustainability:

- Example: A Rainforest Alliance Certified™ farm where coffee is shade grown can contain diverse wildlife and 100 or more tree species.

coffee

### Environmental Impacts:

- Use of dangerous pesticides, poor working conditions, water pollution, deforestation
- Agrochemical runoff and erosion kills fish, clogs rivers, and chokes coral reefs.

### Opportunity for Sustainability:

- Today, 15% of all the bananas in international trade come from Rainforest Alliance Certified Sources, meaning they exceed standards in terms of environmental protection, social equity and economic viability.

bananas

### Environmental Impacts:

- Livestock grazing causes 18% of greenhouse gas emissions. Grazing is a major contributor to deforestation and is the single worst driver of land degradation.

### Opportunity for Sustainability:

- Certification will require cattle operations to implement practices like sustainable pasture management, animal welfare and carbon-footprint reduction—transforming deforestation, GHG emissions and animal abuse.

beef

acres and growing it employs some 25 million families worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Fluctuations in coffee supply and demand, government policies and coffee prices can create unstable financial conditions, not only for the farmers, but also for wildlife. That's because coffee farms can serve as important buffer zones for biodiverse forest habitats.

One coffee cooperative in El Salvador that is Rainforest Alliance Certified holds more than 100 tree species. There, biologists have spotted members of dozens of species of rare birds, wild cats such as ocelots, postcard-size butterflies, technicolor frogs, seldom-seen orchids, monkeys and (once) a giant anteater. There are varying credible certification programs out there and certification is one way to ensure that coffee farms maintain wildlife habitat and other environmental benefits, while also protecting livelihoods and worker rights.

Bananas, the world's most popular fruit, are another example of how specific changes in farming can reduce impacts. Before the 1990s, banana plantations were infamous for environmental and social abuses, which included the use of dangerous pesticides, poor working conditions, water pollution and deforestation. Pesticide-impregnated plastic bags, which protect bananas as they grow, often littered riverbanks and beaches near banana farms, while agrochemical runoff and erosion killed fish, clogged rivers and choked coral reefs.

Today widespread use of certification programs on banana farms is helping protect the environment while also protecting people by fostering farming practices that improve worker health and safety and empower farmers and their communities economically.

Beef, a staple of most American diets, also has significant environmental impacts. More than a quarter of the Earth's terrestrial surface is devoted to livestock grazing, which causes 18 percent of global GHG emissions.<sup>4</sup> Grazing is a major contributor to deforestation and the single worst driver of land degradation.

New sustainable ranching standards developed by the Sustainable Agriculture Network (an international coalition of leading conservation groups) will require certified cattle operations in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania to implement best practices like integrated management systems, sustainable pasture management, animal welfare and carbon-footprint reduction. As farms voluntarily adopt the new standards and get certified, the deforestation, GHG emissions and animal abuse ranching causes now stand to be transformed.

In addition to helping the planet, certification also helps farmers survive economically by encouraging them to operate more efficiently, giving them entrees to consumer markets and often paying them a price premium for what they produce. Programs like Rainforest Alliance Certified, Fair Trade and others can help farmers bear the erratic swings in the global market, so they can remain in business and keep working to adopt more sustainable practices.

These programs are already significant forces in global markets, and are growing fast. In 2010, more than 219,000 metric tons of coffee, 120,000 metric tons of tea and 15 percent of all the bananas in international trade came from Rainforest Alliance Certified farms. But there is plenty of room for further expansion of sustainable markets in all areas of agriculture.

### Protecting the World's Remaining Forests

Forests provide food, fuel, fiber, medicine and building materials. They shelter communities and wildlife, prevent erosion, filter water, protect coral reefs, control pests and mitigate climate change by capturing and storing atmospheric carbon. In fact, they contain more carbon than the atmosphere and the world's oil reserves combined. Yet they are also the planet's fastest-disappearing natural resource.

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400 years ago:

2/3

**two thirds** of the planet's land mass was **covered by forest.**

Today:

1/3

**only half remains** and we continue to lose what stands.







Photos courtesy Rainforest Alliance

Above: A worker holds a package of Rainforest Alliance Certified coffee  
Below: Women pluck tea on the Rainforest Alliance Certified tea estates in the Coonoor region of India.



Four hundred years ago, two-thirds of the planet's land mass was covered by forest. Today only half remains and we continue to lose what stands. Deforestation currently accounts for some 15 percent of greenhouse gas emissions—as much all the cars, trucks, trains, planes and boats in the world combined.<sup>5</sup> Protecting forests, especially tropical forests, is one of the most cost-effective ways to reduce emissions and preserve biodiversity and support forest-dependent communities.

But less than one-tenth of forests are formally protected. The great majority are subject to logging and other development, and are under pressure from continuing strong demand for wood and wood products. They are also one of the world's most important global carbon stocks. Their soils, trees, wetlands and other ecosystems contain an estimated 205 billion tons of carbon—the equivalent of decades' worth of global emissions from burning fossil fuels.<sup>6</sup>

One way to protect them is through global forestry certification programs, such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). FSC is a voluntary, independent certification program acknowledged as the gold standard for sustainable management of working forests. Almost anything made from wood or other forest products is available with the FSC label.

Compared to non-certified forestry, FSC working forests are managed sustainably, harvesting lower volumes of wood with less environmental impact, replanting trees, providing wide conservation areas, preserving sensitive ecosystems and protecting endangered species habitat. Today a total of 334 million forest acres worldwide—about twice the land area of Texas—are FSC certified.

### Giving Producers and Consumers a Choice

With substantive, independent certification programs producers have an incentive to make their operations sustainable and beneficial. Operating sustainably has a recognized value, and therefore becomes a viable choice.

The same is true for us as consumers, who are the ones choosing to buy the products with credible certified labels. Studies show that given a reasonable choice between products that are sustainably produced and those that aren't, we'll consistently prefer the sustainable product. In fact, demand for environmentally and socially responsible goods is at an all-time high. If we connect the dots between what we buy at the supermarket, and our aspirations for a sustainable future, it opens up all kinds of opportunities for us to be a key part of the solution, and help create positive environmental and social impacts. Our ability to choose, our power as consumers to signal an alignment of economic forces with our aspirations for the future, is the biggest lever we have to create positive global change.

**Consumers need to recognize the power they have, for good or ill—a power far greater than governments.**

As the market for sustainable goods and services grows, we're rapidly reaching a tipping point beyond which that force will be fully unleashed. When it is, products will carry their "real" prices, with the cost and added value of sustainable production built in. Consumers and businesses will be more aware of the impacts their choices have on workers and the environment, and will demonstrate their support for sustainability through their purchases.

The idea that we can simply shop our way out of looming environmental threats like climate change and mass species extinctions has been justly ridiculed. Buying yet more stuff that happens to be marketed to appeal to the eco-aware won't save the planet. But consumers do need to recognize the purchasing power they have, for good or ill—a power far greater than governments. Gains in the key sectors of farming and forestry would not have happened without consumer demand driving them.

Our choices aren't isolated. They connect with the choices of millions of others and they reverberate, as business people say, across the entire supply chain, from the company boardrooms to the workers who grew the food and the ecosystems that support the farm. Consumers who understand that will continue to drive the sustainable certification movement, which will keep pushing the global economy towards sustainability.

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*Tensie Whelan serves as the president of the global sustainability non-profit Rainforest Alliance ([www.rainforest-alliance.org](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org)), which works to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior. She has been involved with the Rainforest Alliance since 1990, first as a board member, then as a consultant, becoming the executive director in 2000. Whelan has been working in the environmental field for more than 25 years, including as the vice president of conservation information at the National Audubon Society and executive director of the New York League of Conservation Voters.*



## ECO-conscious choices you can make

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**+ Choose certified products when you shop:** Consumers can help drive the evolution of the sustainable economy by choosing products bearing the Rainforest Alliance, FSC seals and other credible certification labels. **Find available certified products at:** [www.rainforest-alliance.org/green-living/marketplace](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/green-living/marketplace) \* [www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels](http://www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels) \* [www.ecolabelindex.com/ecolabels](http://www.ecolabelindex.com/ecolabels)

**+ Choose sustainable destinations when you travel:** Travel and tourism is the world's largest industry, and has enormous environmental and social impacts, for good or ill. Help make it a powerful engine for a sustainable economy by choosing sustainable certified destinations when you travel. **Find more information and a searchable database of certified destinations at:** [SustainableTrip.org](http://SustainableTrip.org)

**+ Choose positive impacts where you work:** Businesses can produce and source goods and services sustainably, which studies show improves their bottom lines as well as their environmental and social impacts. **For resources to get started,** see [www.rainforest-alliance.org](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org) and click on "Engage Your Business"

