

PALM LITERATURE

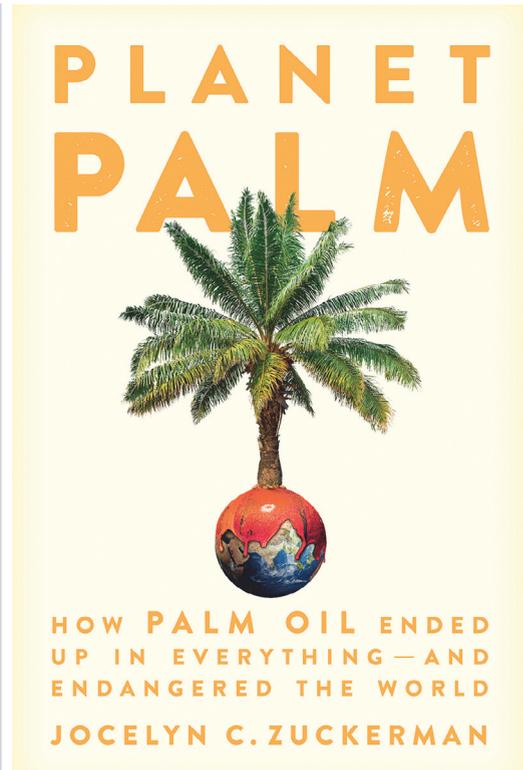
PLANET PALM: HOW PALM OIL ENDED UP IN EVERYTHING – AND ENDANGERED THE WORLD – Jocelyn C. Zuckermann. 2021. The New Press, New York. ISBN 978-1-62097-523-7. Hardcover. 352 pp. US\$27.99.

To be completely honest, the prospect of reading a 300+ page book written by a New York-based foodie journalist on a subject as rehashed and over-hyped as palm oil did not really excite me. The polemics circulating through the public domain and civil society have been self-maintaining on their own for years, continually fuelled by partisan and truncated information, making the scientist quite reluctant to devote time and energy to publications that do not exactly belong to the scientific sphere. The design of the book's cover itself and its rather provocative subtitle made me fear the indigestible and repetitive reading of another advocacy exercise, published for an already convinced public, uninformative and ultimately useless.

I must admit that I found Zuckerman's book much better than I expected. It reads easily, and it really interested me and kept me going, even if it ultimately disappointed me.

The perspective chosen by the author to tell the story of a worldwide saga built around a tropical agricultural commodity is interesting. Regarding tropical products, the gap between producing and consuming countries still exists, and very few people know the real story behind familiar products like tea bags or a chocolate bars (or even car tires). One cannot take away from the author her passionate interest in palm oil production, and her desire to describe all its facets, including its colonial history. Yes, palm oil is everywhere, and its large-scale cultivation has huge ecological and social impacts.

The book undoubtedly meets its target as an eye-opener, opting for a dramatic tone supported by small grainy black and white pictures that add to the dramatic effect. However, one cannot be a specialist in everything, and the resolutely pro-environmentalist bias taken by the author has often led her to take damaging shortcuts.



Indeed, Zuckerman unfortunately does not avoid the usual pitfall of describing an agricultural commodity as another "Devil's plant" (as it has long been the case for cotton or sugar cane). The effect on media and the public is predictable in these times of COP26 when many people are questioning the basics of sustainable development, climate change mitigation and food security.

During most of the steps of her worldwide tour, Zuckermann often presents a simplistic view of the sector, in which the good guys and the bad ones are easy to spot, with a naive bias that is very unproductive for those looking for real solutions. This naivety and her penchant for simple solutions is also found in the simplistic proposal to ban palm oil as the remedy for junk food and for the global standardization of our diets. Multi-stakeholders' initiatives for a more sustainable production such as RSPO (the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil), which are not perfect but important for understanding changes and recent developments in the sector, are not described in detail and swept from the narrative in a negative way and far too quickly, based on a single, partisan testimony.

Zuckermann's book does a good job of explaining the present success of oil palm

cultivation through its historical context, primarily its colonial and post-colonial history. It is in the chapter of solutions that the book falls short. The author did not show a real desire to explore current and future initiatives to develop palm-based production systems. She also did not take the time to directly address questions to the main political and social leaders in producing countries on the geostrategic stakes linked to the oil palm. This is a real pity, because the historical study and the geographical panorama described by Zuckermann is of great interest. The idea of blending history, science, politics and food

was an original one, and the author showed real talent in exploring their intertwining.

One would have liked to find the same determination in complementing this journalistic approach with prospects for changes and development in the sector, supported by recent advances provided by non-governmental organizations and research institutions acting on the ground.

ALAIN RIVAL
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