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Africa Section

MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

Palm oil expansion in Africa: a threat to people and the environment

Abuja, Nigeria, 8 February 2015:

The Society for Conservation Biology (SCB), via its Africa Section, has issued a position statement on threats to society and the environment from the expansion of palm oil production in Africa and elsewhere. This policy statement highlights the threat to biodiversity posed by expansion of industrial oil palm production in equatorial Africa.

Africa contains about 675 million hectares of forests, or roughly 17 percent of the world total. However, it is estimated that Africa lost 3.4 million hectares of forests between 2000 and 2010, of which 572,000 hectares were primary forest. The decline has resulted mainly from the rising demand for agricultural lands, commercial harvesting of timber, urbanization, and industrialization.

Forests and their biodiversity are an inextricable part of Earth's life support systems. They provide irreplaceable ecosystem services ranging from clean air, water purification, to wildlife habitat, and pollination services, and they help support resilience to climate change. Even with efforts to stem forest loss, deforestation still continues unabated. The global deforestation rate for 2000-2010 averaged 13 million hectares annually, although this is somewhat less than previous decades[1].

Recent significant investments in African agriculture in the oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) industry are likely to lead to biodiversity losses similar to those in Southeast Asia. Indonesia is projected to lose most of its natural rainforest by 2022[2]. Oil palm production not only causes natural forest cover loss, but can also lead to direct mortality of endangered species, such as the world's forest primates including orangutans in Southeast Asia. Oil palm has become one of the most rapidly expanding equatorial crops in the world[3]. The global extent of oil palm cultivation increased from 3.6 million ha in 1961 to 13.2 million ha in 2006[4]. Although oil palm is a native species in Africa, where it is mixed with other subsistence crops, new frontiers for its cultivation are opening up in West Africa and the Congo Basin. Given the implications of this expansion for primates, at the Great Apes Summit in September 2013 in Wyoming, USA, delegates committed to the conservation of apes and their habitats and articulated a six action point statement on oil palm expansion[5].

Environmental degradation, human health and well-being

The SCB's position statement highlights the rapid and unsustainable destruction of forests due to industrial oil palm expansion in West and Central Africa. It links oil palm expansion to the attrition of biodiversity, including flagship species such as apes, and to implications for human health and economic self-sufficiency. The SCB calls on African governments, policy makers and societies to formulate effective policies that support ecological sustainability of African equatorial forests, and prevent long-term impoverishment of African countries.

There is a growing appreciation of the links between ecosystem alteration and human health. A recently reported model of infectious disease[6] showed that most epidemics over the last few decades – AIDS, Ebola, West Nile, SARS, Lyme disease and others – are due to alteration of ecosystems. Fully 60% of emerging infectious diseases affecting humans are zoonotic (from animals), and more than two-thirds of those originate in wildlife. Fragmenting forests increases exposure of humans to these diseases. A recent World Bank study reported by the New York Times[7] shows a potential economic drain of as much as $32.6 billion by the end of 2015 if the recent Ebola epidemic spreads into neighbouring countries beyond Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone.
Finally, monetary contributions of forests to the economics of the developing world officially exceed $US 250 billion[8] – easily more than double the flow of total development assistance and more than the annual global output of gold and silver combined. Ghana's forest resources play a large role in income generation and household food security with forestry products providing sustenance and revenue for about 2.5 million people in the country[9]. Forest biodiversity such as great apes are of economic importance given their contribution through tourism, education and scientific research.

Read the full statement with references: http://www.conbio.org/images/content_policy/SCB_Africa_Section_Position_Statement_Oil_Palm_Expansion_2015_01_27.pdf

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Notes to Editors:

About the Society for Conservation Biology

The Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) is a global professional body dedicated to promoting scientific study of the maintenance, loss, and restoration of biological diversity. Its membership includes a wide range of people interested in the conservation and study of biological diversity: resource managers, educators, government and private conservation workers, and students make up the more than 5,000 members world-wide. It was originally founded in 1985 in Michigan, USA, and now has active sections throughout the world. For more information, visit www.conbio.org.

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