



Hard manual labour: Young men handling the fruit bunches using wooden poles with iron hooks

# Who says it's not possible?

The production of palm oil is generally regarded as a major environmental problem. But there are exceptions. Leo Frühschütz went to Ghana to take closer look.



Text: Leo Frühschütz Photos: Marc Doradzillo



Her fingers make short work of removing the thumb-sized red fruit from the thorny husk and brushing off the remaining petals. Ouch! While watching Esther Larby's hands, I wasn't paying attention to my own and promptly hurt myself on the thorns. "Hey, you've got to pay attention," Esther scolds. Then she laughs. To have an obroni – a foreigner – as her intern, is clearly entertaining.

I am seated with ten more women on small stools in a circle, plucking the hard fruit from the bunches. A bit of banter goes back and forth, but the work requires concentration. Slowly, the bowls beside the women fill up. Their contents are then poured into bags to be weighed. In the evening, the women get paid. "I make 15 to 20 cedis a day", says Esther.

That is five to seven Canadian dollars – very little for eight hours of monotonous work, but quite a bit in a country where the minimum wage is eight cedis a day. Welcome to Ghana.

## Palm oil is much more than burning primeval forest

The cultivation of oil palms has a long tradition here. The first plantations were established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, then rapidly spread around the entire equator.

This did not become a problem until vegetable-oil consumption around the world reached dizzying heights. It now stands at 174 million tonnes a year – twice as much as in the year 2000.

Palm oil accounts for the largest share of the increase because oil palms have the highest yield among all oil-producing plants. One hectare of land suffices to produce four tonnes of palm oil, the weight of four small cars. To produce the same amount of oil, three hectares of canola or four hectares of sunflowers would be needed.

Today, more than 85 percent of the world's supply of palm oil is produced in Indonesia and Malaysia, at an enormous cost to the local environment. Many people now associate palm oil with burning primeval forests and dead orangutans – reason enough not to want it as an ingredient in their cookies and bread spreads.

That's why I have travelled to Ghana, where a project aims to show that organic and fairly produced palm oil

can be beneficial to both people and the environment. Asuom is a small town, about a four-hour drive from Ghana's capital Accra, and home of Serendipalm, a project of Dr. Bronner's, a manufacturer of organic cosmetics. "Here we produce the palm oil needed for our soaps," says Julia Edmaier, one of six people in charge of Dr. Bronner's raw-material sourcing. But the oil made by Serendipalm does not just go into soap-making.

Organic food producer Rapunzel buys part of the oil used for its sweet bread spreads, such as Samba, from Serendipalm. "We stand by our decision to use palm oil," Rapunzel spokesperson Eva Kiene explains. "But the oil has to satisfy our standards for organic, fair-trade products."

### Palm oil provides the funds to educate children

Steady work is rare in Asuom. "After school, I applied for many jobs", Esther tells me. She finally landed one at Serendipalm because the company eschews the local tradition of providing jobs to relatives and acquaintances first. With her high-school degree and fluent English, the 28-year-old is overqualified for the work she does. But money is more important for now: "I can support my mother and pay the school fees for my little sister." Her own four-year-old daughter will be attending school soon, too.

Esther is not alone with this reasoning: Most of the women in our circle are between forty and fifty years old and have as many as five kids at home. Every cedi they can possibly spare goes towards their children's schooling. The state schools are free but often don't provide a good education. "Some of the teachers just send the children to work on their fields," one of the workers interjects.

Most of the women employed by Serendipalm have never earned a steady wage before. "I helped in the fields", they say when asked about their previous jobs, or: "I sold fruit on the market from time to time".

Abena, a widow, tells me how she used to buy fish, smoke it and resell it to feed her children.



Workers stack the fruit bunches for transport to the oil mills. Most of the work here is done manually.



Hidden treasure: The thorny tusks contain the red fruits, whose firm flesh in turn contains the oil.



Oil palm fruits cannot simply be pressed, like olives, but have to be steamed for up to two hours first.

Those difficult years have left their traces in the face of the gaunt 57-year-old. Now she is glad to be able to provide for herself and not be a burden to her children, who have long since moved to Accra.

In a few years, she will get a pension thanks to the health and pension insurance contributions Serendipalm makes on behalf of all of its employees. The workers get five more days of vacation than is required by law, and three months of paid maternity leave. The company also provides them with a free lunch.

### Axes, tubs and wheelbarrows – a world of manual labour

Despite a total of 270 employees and the 450 organic farmers who supply the oil palm fruits, Serendipalm is a small enterprise. Its annual production of 700 tonnes of palm oil involves a lot of manual labour.

It starts when Serendipalm's trucks transport the palm bunches – weighing 10 to 15 kilogram each – from the farmers' fields to the cleaning hall, a building as large as a school gym, but a lot airier.

Its roof rests on metal supports; only the bottom two meters are bricked walls. Wire netting keeps birds out but lets the breeze pass through. Nonetheless, it's sweaty work. Two young men, dressed in faded jeans and muscle shirts and armed with 1.5 meter long wooden poles with iron hooks, jump onto the truck. They push the hooks into the fresh fruit bunches, or "FFBs", and heave them off the truck. Their co-workers use identical poles to arrange the FFBs in 2-meter tall rectangular stacks in the hall.

These are then processed by the next team: Three men with chopping blocks grab FFBs from a stack with their gloved left hands and, with four or five strikes of their sharp axes, remove the fruits in their thorny enclosures from the stalk.

Women shovel the chopped-up FFBs into tin tubs. They carry the tubs on their heads further into the hall and empty them at the feet of the pluckers. In addition to our circle, there are a dozen others.



Steady employees earn about 20 cedis, approximately seven Canadian dollars, a day. The minimum wage in Ghana is about eight cedis. Serendipalm also pays for their health and pension insurance and provides a free lunch.



Tractors and trucks transport the fruit bunches from the fields to be processed in the cleaning hall.



In the cleaning hall, the pluckers sit on stools and remove the hard fruit from its thorny husk.

In a steady stream, the fruit leaves the hall, again in tin tubs balanced on the heads of women who make carrying forty kilogram in this manner look easy. All the way across the yard they go, to the production hall. There it is hot and stuffy, the air full of wood smoke and the characteristic palm oil smell, a heavy mixture reminiscent of violets and deep-frying grease.

Steaming, pressing, cleaning – palm oil production involves a lot of work.

Oil palm fruits cannot simply be pressed, like olives. Their flesh is very firm and needs to be steamed for up to two hours before it releases the oil. For this purpose, the production hall contains six round wood-fired brick ovens with tin cylinders on top. The ovens heat water to steam the palm fruit. The steam is released through the cylinders and collects under the roof.

Again, tin tubs are used to carry the steamed fruits to the oil press. They are poured into a funnel and soon a reddish liquid runs into the next tub. The liquid is a mixture of oil, water and fruit flesh, which will be boiled in smaller ovens for another two hours. The water vaporizes, the sludge collects at the bottom and the clean oil is finally separated into a tank. The sludge is not wasted, however – the farmers use it as organic fertilizer on their fields.

The oil press also generates a by-product: a mixture of fibrous pulp and kernels that will be separated by a machine. The pulp is used as fertilizer, while the kernels are removed to produce palm kernel oil.

Making a living from palm oil is very hard work, I realize, as Safianu Moro,



Esther Larby shows author Leo Fröhshütz how to separate the red palm fruit from its husk.

## Organic palm oil

For more than 20 years, most of the world's organic palm oil has been produced by oil mills in Colombia (Daboon) and Brazil (Agropalma). Both companies also produce conventional palm oil and are listed among the most sustainable of the major producers in all the rankings. Natural Habitats, a company producing organic, fair-trade palm oil in cooperation with smallholders in Ecuador and Sierra Leone, operates on a much smaller scale.

Dr. Bronner's Serendipalm, whose clients include Rapunzel and [text missing in the original article], is the fourth-largest producer of organic palm oil.

## Red and healthy

As its glowing orange colour indicates, palm oil contains plenty of vitamin E and beta carotene. This is why unrefined palm oil is sold in health-food stores. In the countries around the equator, palm oil is the most commonly used oil for cooking and frying. Since half of it is made up of palmitin, a saturated fatty acid, it tolerates high temperatures well but is not great news for cholesterol levels. Like conventional oil, organic palm oil is deodorized and bleached for further processing.

## Palm oil as fuel

Germany imports about 1.4 million tonnes of palm oil every year – or two percent of worldwide production. More than half of it ends up powering motor vehicles, because in Germany, diesel fuel contains 6.3% biodiesel, which is made from palm oil and other vegetable oils. Only a quarter is used by food manufacturers. The remainder is added to animal feed or processed by the chemical industry. By contrast, Germans use only 7,000 tonnes of organic palm oil – as an ingredient in processed foods and organic soap.

## “Sustainable” – in name at least

The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) is an association of industrial and commercial enterprises that has developed standards for sustainable palm oil production. Criteria and monitoring are very lax, however, and most environmental organizations reject the RSPO as greenwashing. RSPO certification has led to some improvements on participating plantations. It's better than nothing, perhaps, but nowhere near enough. And definitely neither organic nor fair. Some activists tend to consider these aspects as two sides of the same coin.

O as in oil

Serendipalm’s managing director, shows me around. “Of course, most of these processes could be performed much more effectively by machines,” he says.

“But we want to keep the people in work.” That has its price. “Our oil is the most expensive on the market,” Julia Edmaier adds.

“That’s why we’re glad to have customers like Rapunzel, who share our approach to quality.” Instead of mechanizing the traditional production processes, Serendipalm aims to make them more efficient and less hard on the workers.

How far they have come I realize when I visit one of the tiny operations that produce palm oil for the local market. Sooty steamers are fuelled by car tyres; an old diesel engine powers the oil press and spews its fumes far and wide. For cleaning, the oil simmers in open pans above the fire.

Employment for the locals or cheap oil thanks to machines?

I encounter the polar opposite after a few kilometres' drive along a dusty red road. Suddenly, enormous oil palm plantations extend to the horizon. A few buildings, tanks and a tall, belching smokestack can be seen in front of them. Ghana Oil Palm Development Company Limited, or GOPDC, is Ghana's biggest oil mill. It produces as much palm oil in a week as Serendipalm does in a year. There are a number of such large-scale mills in the country – Ghana is number eight among palm-oil producers. As in the other Western African countries, big conglomerates are pushing onto the market because land for plantations is cheap and there is a lot of money to be made. GOPDC processes the harvests of many small farmers, but also owns 20.000 hectares of plantations of its own. "Four years ago, all of this was still forest", my guide Samah tells me as we pass new plantations. She also points out the empty brown circles around each of the plants. "They spray glyphosate."

Herbicides are not Daniel Myaoa's cup of tea at all. His palm oil field is lush and green as we make our way in rubber boots through knee-high grass and leaves. Daniel has been farming organically since 2008 and was one of the first farmers supplying Serendipalm. Each of the farmers has two to three hectares of land where he cultivates oil palms or cocoa, as well as a field for his own food with corn, plantains, and a few mango and papaya trees.

Daniel carries a five-meter long wooden pole with a sickle at the end: his harvest knife. Oil palms are several meters tall, and the FFBS grow high up in their crowns. When the 40-year-old spots a ripe bunch on his way across the field, he applies the knife to the lowest leaf, and after one quick pull on



The oil press generates a by-product: a mixture of fibrous pulp and kernels to be processed further.

"Our oil is the most expensive on the market."



The mixture of oil and fruit pulp is carried from the press to the oven – in tin tubs balanced on the workers' heads.

the pole, the three-meter long leaf sails to the ground like a giant green feather. Two or three others follow, until the bunch is exposed. One more pull and it lands on the ground with a thud. While Daniel continues in search of the next tree that is ready for harvest, his son Stephen carries three bunches the 300 meters to the next dirt road. Means of transportation: tub and head, twenty times a day.

For one tonne of FFBS, Serendipalm pays the farmers 425 cedis – 140 Canadian dollars. This is ten percent more than what conventional FFBS fetch on the market. "It is hard work, and of course I would like to earn more", says Daniel. But he appreciates that Serendipalm pays on the spot and that he does not have to go chasing after his money like so many of his conventional peers. It also helps that Serendipalm comes and collects his harvest for free and grants interest-free loans to the farmers for repairs and the like. "All in all, my life has improved over the past few years."

And this holds true not just for the farmers, but also for their communities. As usual with fair-trade products, the buyers of the oil pay a surcharge, which is invested into local projects.

In Asuom, the money was used to finance a childbirth centre; in neighbouring Abaam, it went to a computer school. The women plucking the palm fruit have also suggested a project. They want a local school that provides a good education for their children. I ask my interpreter Esther if that might be something for her daughter. But she has other plans. "I will keep working here for another year, and then I'll have enough money set aside to go to college. I want to become a teacher."



Leo had lunch in the cafeteria every day. His favourite: Banku, a dish made from fermented corn, served with palm-oil soup.

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