

To
Shri Narendra Modi
Hon'ble Prime Minister of India
Prime Minister's Office
152 South Block
New Delhi - 110011

21 November 2021

Subject: Planning the scientific expansion of oil palm in India to protect biodiversity

Dear Shri Narendra Modi,

We are writing to you in our capacity as scientists and conservationists about the recent approval of the National Mission on Edible Oils-Oil Palm (NMEO-OP), for which an outlay of Rs. 11,040 crores has been earmarked, with special focus on oil palm expansion in North-East India and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. We understand that because India has been heavily dependent on imports for the bulk of its vegetable oil demand, the NMEO-OP seeks to make India more self-reliant with respect to vegetable oil security.

However, we are concerned that the expansion of oil palm plantations is likely to occur at the cost of India's natural habitats and globally significant biodiversity and this has not been considered in the NMEO-OP policy. Of particular concern is the potential for massive forest loss in the priority areas of North-East India and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands as well as Open Natural Ecosystems in the rest of India (recently mapped by researchers). Oil palm expansion is already replacing biodiversity-rich habitats, especially in India's North-East, which spans two Global Biodiversity Hotspots, and is one of the biologically richest regions on earth. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are also part of a Global Biodiversity Hotspot and are home to globally threatened endemic species found nowhere else in the world. In addition to their rich biodiversity, these regions are also crucial for indigenous cultures and societies.

Our country's few remaining forests and natural habitats will be India's first line of defence against the challenges that the ongoing global climate crisis will inevitably create and will be a crucial component of India's global Cop26 commitment to net zero by 2070. Further, natural habitats and the preservation of their biodiversity are also crucial to prevent the spillover of zoonotic diseases such as SARS-CoV-2. In this light, India is at a critical juncture in its need to protect its little remaining natural and semi-natural habitats.

Under NMEO-OP, the GoI aims to achieve an addition of 6.5 lakh hectares under oil palm cultivation by 2025-2026, and a further 6.7 lakh hectares by 2029-2030. Cumulatively, the total area to be added under oil palm cultivation in the next ten years is therefore targeted to be 13.2 lakh hectares. This is a vast area, almost the size of Nagaland. We are concerned that such a large expanse of new oil palm plantations in the next ten years might replace and therefore come at the cost of natural and semi-natural habitats, which—as we emphasise here again—are absolutely irreplaceable in both India and the world's fight against the climate crisis and biodiversity loss.

India is poised at the very start of its domestic oil palm expansion. Without appropriate checks and balances and safeguards for biodiversity, protection of land rights, livelihoods and socio-cultural traditions, India will be doomed to repeat the catastrophic mistakes of Indonesia and Malaysia. As the South-East Asian experience shows, unplanned expansion of oil palm plantations has led to a massive loss of natural habitats and biodiversity, and also created serious socio-economic and land tenure issues for farmers. For instance, 68% of Indonesia's area under oil palm has come at the expense of over 100 lakh hectares of tropical rainforests that are the last home worldwide for charismatic and critically endangered species such as tigers, orangutans and hornbills.

For India however, self-sufficiency in domestic palm oil production need not come at the cost of natural habitats. In this regard, we would like to draw your kind attention to a peer-reviewed paper co-authored by some of us in the prestigious journal *Nature Food* that shows that India does not need to replace its little remaining natural and semi-natural habitats if it has to accommodate oil palm plantations and become self-sufficient in vegetable oil production. Even by completely avoiding oil palm plantations in the Global Biodiversity Hotspots of North-East

India and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and other natural and semi-natural habitats, India still has 38.8 million hectares of land open for the cultivation of oil palm, even a small part of which can produce more than our domestic demand for vegetable oil by 2030.

We urge that the NMEO-OP adopts a transparent policy that enables the sparing of biodiversity-rich regions, habitats and ecosystems and protects land rights. Especially at this early stage, any expansion of oil palm has to be planned carefully and meticulously. Importantly, and as we emphasise in the *Nature Food* paper, policies for the expansion of palm plantations should be region-specific and must take into account regional patterns of biodiversity, protected areas and socio-economic and land tenure systems. Before expansion, India's future trajectory with respect to domestic palm oil production needs to be rooted in a science-based and rights-based policy that enables us to relieve the immense pressure to replace biodiversity-rich forests with oil palm monocultures as well as ensure our vegetable oil security. In this, India has the unique chance to be a world leader in guiding sustainable oil palm expansion principles throughout the developing world.

We urge you to accordingly kindly direct your Ministries in this important and urgent endeavour. We urge that the Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region and the Ministry of Science and Technology are involved in a cross-sectoral discussion on this vital mission.

Yours sincerely,

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Copy to:

Hon'ble Union Minister for Environment, Forests and Climate Change

Hon'ble Union Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare

Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Planning

Principal Scientific Adviser, Government of India

Director General of Forests, Government of India

The Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change

Chief Executive Officer, Niti Ayog

Additional Secretary, Agriculture, Niti Ayog