SCOPING THE POTENTIAL UNINTENDED IMPACTS OF THE RSPO CERTIFICATION STANDARD ON BIODIVERSITY AND NATURAL HABITATS

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A multi-disciplinary scientific research programme focused on testing the impact of certification

- Our funding comes from RSPO, UK/Dutch government and industry

- Academic peer-reviewed research and easy-to-digest resources
One of the three key impact aims of the RSPO is to protect and enhance ecosystems.

RSPO is working to achieve sustainability within a complex system of interacting political, social, environmental and economic factors, which are sometimes conflicting.

Therefore, principles and criteria designed with the best intentions, can sometimes have unforeseen and unintended impacts.

It is vital we understand what the unintended effects of the RSPO are, in order to make sure we are accounting.

Key topic in the RSPO’s research agenda.
METHODS

• There is very little existing evidence about unintended impacts of RSPO

• Our intention was to scope the possible impacts the standard might be having

• Positive or negative

• Searched the literature for evidence of unintended impacts from a wide range of conservation and sustainability initiatives

• Searched for any studies focusing on the RSPO

• Conducted surveys with stakeholders at last year’s Roundtable.
• The study yielded 11 types of possible unintended impact

• They fell into three main categories:
  1. unintended impacts associated with conflicts between environmental requirements and economic imperatives,
  2. displacement of biodiversity declines and natural habitat loss,
  3. positive unintended impacts.
CONFLICT WITH ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES

- A large increase in forest loss in areas now owned by certified plantations prior to NPP implementation (Carlson et al. 2018; Gatti et al. 2019)
- Studies did not determine whether these areas belonged to RSPO members at the time of clearance, but a large difference in deforestation levels compared to the rest of the industry (Carlson et al. 2018)
- Recorded for other initiatives (Lueck & Michael 2003, Baird et al. 2009)

- Oil palm yield driven policies could be encouraging practices that intensify oil palm production at the expense of environmental considerations and possibly livelihoods (Suwarno et al. 2019)
- Certified smallholders were more likely to have monocrop plantations and used large amounts of herbicide to control weeds (Suwarno 2019; de Vos 2019)
- Polyculture farming could be better for biodiversity (e.g. Azhar et al. 2014) and for creating more stable income streams.
DISPLACEMENT OF BIODIVERSITY DECLINES

- The RSPO policy on biodiversity conservation has focused on forests and now has stringent no-deforestation criteria
- Evidence of this scenario from other initiatives in Costa Rica (Fagan et al. 2013) and USA (Wu 2000)
- Valuable ancient grasslands are difficult to identify and poorly protected by national law (Parr et al. 2014)
- Grasslands are being converted in Colombia (Lopez-Ricuarte et al. 2017) and Gabon (www.rspo.org)
- A relatively small proportion of the industry is RSPO
- Evidence suggests a strong bias towards certification in uncontentious areas, leaving vulnerable forest and peatlands available to unscrupulous growers (Carlson et al. 2018)
- Pattern also occurs among smallholders (Maghfira 2018)
- This scenario has occurred for other initiatives such as fishery US restrictions (Helvey et al. 2017)
POSITIVE UNINTENDED IMPACTS

- There is strong evidence for protected area initiatives (Di Lorenzo et al. 2016)
- And evidence of spillover over short distances from set-asides in oil palm (Lucey et al. 2014)
- But many HCVs are poor quality (Scriven et al. 2019) and so spillover is likely to be minimal currently

- Funding research directly (e.g. Asner et al. 2018), collecting data through HCV monitoring and assessment, encouraging interest from the wider scientific community (e.g. Deere et al. 2017)
- Translating into positive benefits through evidence based policy development within the RSPO (e.g. riparian management guidelines) and beyond (e.g. HCS approach which is also being adopted in rubber, pulp & paper, and cocoa sectors)
PRIORITISING RESEARCH AND POLICY ACTION

• We scored the potential unintended impacts based on:
  • the likelihood of occurrence,
  • the potential extent of the impact,
  • the ease with which the impact may be addressed by the RSPO

• Each of the three categories was scored (1=low, 2=medium, 3=high) and the total score (max possible =9) was used to determine the highest priority impacts.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TOP THREE PRIORITIES

Priority 1: Displacement of biodiversity declines and habitat loss to non-members
Score: 8/9

- Continue working to be inclusive
- Extra efforts are needed to target groups of growers who are not currently engaged in the sustainability agenda

Priority 2: Displacement of biodiversity declines and habitat loss to non-forest habitats
Score: 7/9

- Clear, detailed guidance for HCV assessors tasked with identifying these areas to avoid expansion into these areas

Priority 3: Proliferation of new knowledge to benefit biodiversity and habitat conservation
Score: 7/9

- Encourage and facilitate the collation and sharing of biodiversity data
- Coordinating and streamlining survey methods would also enhance future research

Policy should be strengthened to explicitly recognise other ecologically important non-forest habitats
THANK YOU

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