

Coffee and the Environment

What are some of the environmental issues, like pesticides and biodiversity, with coffee production?

A: Coffee farming originally developed in Africa as an understory crop beneath diverse shade trees that provided habitat for wildlife such as birds, butterflies, insects, and animals. Traditional farmers usually use sustainable agricultural techniques including composting coffee pulp, rotating crops, and not applying expensive chemicals and fertilizers. In addition, they usually cultivate food alongside cash crops, and intercrop other plants such as banana and nut trees which provide food security as well as additional sources of income.

Fair Trade and the Environment
(PDF 106 kb)

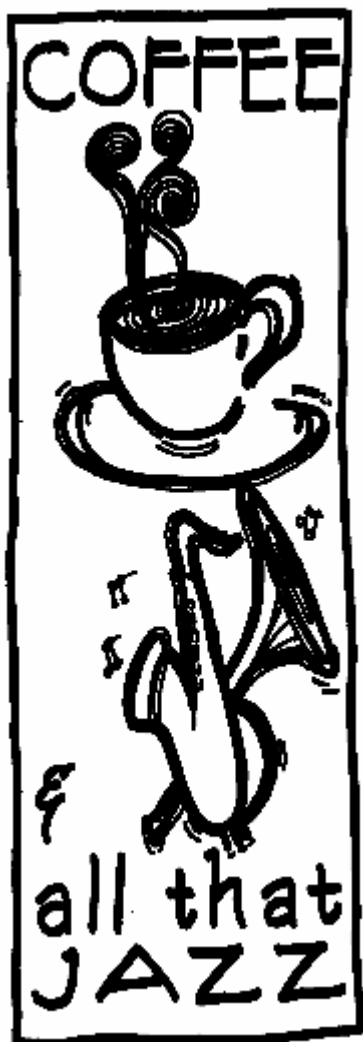
In the 1970s and 80s, as part of the general shift to 'technified agriculture' during the so-called Green Revolution, the US Agency for International Development and other groups gave \$80 million dollars for plantations in Central America to replace traditional shade grown farming techniques with 'sun cultivation' techniques in order to increase yields. This resulted in the destruction of vast forests and biodiversity of over 1.1 million hectares. 'Sun cultivated' coffee involves the cutting down of trees, monocropping, and the input of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. This type of industrial coffee farming leads to severe environmental problems, such as pesticide pollution, deforestation and the extinction of songbirds through habitat destruction. The Smithsonian Institute has identified industrial coffee production as one of the major threats to songbirds in the hemisphere due to deforestation - the birds no longer have a habitat in which to live. Soil and water sources continue to be severely degraded by many coffee farms, as coffee pulp is often dumped into streams. In addition to the harmful effects on the environment caused by the use of chemical pesticides and herbicides in coffee cultivation, workers are also at risk of drinking contaminated water and being poisoned by pesticides.

For these reasons, many bird, tree, and biodiversity conservationists have developed standards for promoting "shade-grown" or "bird-friendly" certified coffee -- that is, coffee grown under a canopy of diverse trees that provide habitat to birds. The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, as well as Rainforest Alliance and the Seattle Audubon Society, all promote various labels of coffee that promote tree and bird conserving farming practices. In addition, many consumers are committed to purchasing organic coffee in order to promote sustainable farming techniques in poor countries.

For more information, see the Proceedings of the First Sustainable Coffee Congress by the Smithsonian Institute, which is a valuable resource on all issues of sustainability.

How does Fair Trade address environmental issues such as shade grown and organic?

A: About 85% of Fair Trade Certified coffee is shade grown and either passive or certified organic. Over half of the certified organic coffee is produced by Fair Trade cooperatives, but unless the coffee is Fair Trade Certified, there is no guarantee that the farmer received the benefit. Certified organic coffee in the Fair Trade market receive a \$.15 premium per pound. Typically, small farmers have never had the



money to finance cutting down of the trees or purchase large amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Small farmers have traditionally passed on sustainable farming techniques to their children. We believe that small farmers are the best stewards of the land, with the highest interest in living in and passing on land with healthy soil free from harmful pesticides to their children. Paying farmers a fair wage with incentives for ecological practices is the best way to encourage sustainable farming. Fair Trade helps guarantee that the benefits of organic farming techniques reach the farmer as well as the consumer and the environment.

We support the shade grown/bird-friendly as well as organic labeling movements as an important tool for consumers to make responsible choices about environmental conservation, and support the double- or triple-labeling of coffee. Most consumers who believe in supporting living wages for farmers also support sustainable farming practices that promote environmental conservation.

How does the Fair Trade certification process differ from organic and shade grown certifications?

A: Organic, Shade Grown, and Bird-Friendly certification labels have contributed important and valuable efforts to promoting sustainable agriculture techniques that benefit farmers and the environment. However, they do not carry the encompassing attributes of the Fair Trade Certification process. Organic coffee is certified according to strict legal criteria. There are a number of different certifying agencies (QAI, OCIA) that all certify according to the same California Organic Foods Act in accordance with the standards of the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM). Shade coffee (bird-friendly) is currently certified by several groups (Rainforest Alliance, Seattle Audubon Society, Smithsonian Institute) but they work with slightly different criteria and do not have comprehensive monitoring procedures. Of these, the Smithsonian Institute has the strongest and most scientifically-based criteria and the best monitoring capability. Fair Trade Certification works with a ten year old comprehensive system of monitoring according to international standards.

Most (85%) Fair Trade Certified coffee is organic and shade grown, and most Shade and Organic coffee comes from farms that are organized as part of the Fair Trade network. Unfortunately, most organic or shade grown coffee is not Fair Trade; you still have to look for the Fair Trade Certified label to know if the farmer got a fair price.

Notably, unlike organic certification, all Fair Trade coffee monitoring and certification costs are paid by the roasters in the consuming countries, not the farmers.

In sum, we believe Fair Trade, Shade/Bird Friendly and Organic labeling initiatives to be symbiotic, because what is good for the workers is good for trees, birds, and our shared environment. Many consumers are looking for coffee that is multiply certified; labor and ecological standards overlap and are mutually beneficial.