

A Chocolate Mess

Cocoa Production and Deforestation in the Ivory Coast

In 2019 a new Forest Code was adopted by the Government of the Ivory Coast. It is the latest legislation brought in to fight back against the tragic and overwhelming destruction of the nation's forests. The Ivory Coast's cocoa industry is the largest on the planet and is the main contributor to the devastation of its forests: 80% is thought to have been destroyed in around only half a century. Famous for its primates, the majesty of the Guinean forests in this part of the world appears to be irretrievable.



The Ivory Coast formally established independence in 1960, distinguishing itself from its former position under French command. In the decades that followed, the West African country was viewed as a decent model for a former colony now operating under its own sovereignty. The harmony was not indefinite; aggression and disorder got the better of day-to-day life as ethnic and religious-led conflicts sprung up across the nation. Generally speaking, this was between the South - where a lot of the cocoa farming takes place - and the North, where migration from poorer bordering nations Mali and Burkina Faso occurred and continues to occur in large numbers. There have been two Civil Wars and life expectancy at birth in 2015 was just 53.08 years. For the cocoa farmers trying to keep their heads down and make enough money to get by the obstacles are endless.

Environmental standards have a desperate time trying to compete with and integrate

alongside economic standards, but once political and legal instability is thrown in to the mix then protection for the natural world becomes nothing but a vague afterthought. A new constitution came into being in 2016 and there are various attempts being made to salvage what is left of Ivorian forests, as well as to stem the tragic destruction that has occurred in them during the past few decades. More than 80% of the shellacked forests, home to Western Chimpanzee, White-naped Mangabey, Roloway Monkey and Miss Waldron's Red Colobus, disappeared from 1960 to 2010 according to the EU and the Ivorian Forest Ministry. Farmers have encroached into protected forests without repercussion for decades, in fact there is anecdotal evidence to suggest this behaviour had been encouraged by the government at times. Land rights are largely recognised through rights of occupation with formal land titles hardly registered at all. This is a land with large swathes of rural areas and customary laws, which can vary from community to community with disputes settled by local chiefs.



Chocolate is loved the world over. It's unsurprising - it tastes so good. Equally unsurprising is that, once the cocoa dust settles, the growers are left with little to show for their work. Typically, the journey of a cocoa bean after it leaves the tired hands of the farmer, sees it travel via a pisteur (middleman), a cooperative, a trading house, a chocolate company and then off to wherever you buy your favourite bars of glorious, sweet goodness.

Farming is carried out by men of all ages and opinions on how it is best carried out vary. For instance, there are disagreements about whether cocoa grows best in shaded areas or in direct sunlight. Growing in direct sunlight was the modus operandi for

most farmers until recently, hence the problems with towering primary forest being destroyed to make way for cocoa monoculture. Teaching farmers how to work better is an option explored by the likes of the UN and the World Bank using Agricultural Extension Schemes. What we mean when we say *better* is open to debate and there are of course sincere concerns that the definition can be interpreted in a way that leans favourably toward the multinational chocolate companies, rather than farmers: leaving programmes open to accusations of neo-colonialism. Certainly, doing nothing or 'business as usual' is not an option. Agricultural Extension Schemes apply research and knowledge to the cocoa farming practices by educating the growers. They receive technical advice and support. A grower's attitude towards farming and the forest varies with their personality, their education and other factors such as age and economic standing. Schemes teach farmers about the importance of things such as growing other crops amongst cocoa trees. Diversifying plants allows for the farmer to sell other products (e.g. rubber or oil) whilst helping to protect against pests and disease. Trees such as Akpi also provide shade, which help sustain cocoa tree growth across seasons. Likewise, the farmers learn that retaining and planting dozens of native tree species can have high nutritional and ecological benefit.

No one single countermeasure is going to do enough to force back a problem that is so well engrained in the way a society operates. Wholesale change only really looks promising when solutions in specific areas settle to dismantle the problems in a combined fashion. Sadly, corruption is pervasive throughout the country and collaboration requires trust. Surely there is a converse to the corrupt and destructive side of this coin? Certainly, technological developments offer solutions for tackling deforestation. One REDD+ project has staff from an NGO called Nitidæ working with farming families to collect data to map and track the changes in where land is being cultivated in the forests. Using open source material and an app on a tablet they are able to establish boundaries, map important trees and find abandoned fields. Technological innovation can be very pragmatic so long as it is cost-effective. UN projects have proven useful in redirecting wealth in order to bring dirt poor producers' value to help ensure that it is not just the shareholders of the multinationals cashing in. Without some intervention the land would be stripped entirely.



Some cocoa policies of the major chocolate manufacturers are more concerned with ethical and sustainable standards than others. Sustainability shouldn't just be the job of a silver-tongued public relations executive, though profit dictates that this is often the case. Sustainability seals can be useful and are another example of a solution in a specific area, but they really aren't perfect. Whilst some consumers will dismiss them as entirely unreliable, they are an attempt to do something - rather than nothing. Consumers need to see improvements in the reliability of product traceability and in 2018 the Rainforest Alliance conceded that its scheme had been falling short of the mark and that they were working to improve their system. Human rights abuses, such as child labour and arbitrary evictions are strong concerns in the industry as well. The fact that human rights groups are watching the trade carefully shows how messy the situation is.

The Ivory Coast is Party to international agreements; the Convention on Biological Diversity and the RAMSAR Convention being notable examples. The government also signed the CFI Joint Framework for Action, alongside major chocolate manufacturers and neighbours Ghana (the second biggest cocoa producer in the world). The recently adopted Forest Code of 2019 imposes greater sanctions on those found growing illegally in protected areas. It also puts 'agroforestry' at the forefront of its restoration ambitions. This is the government prioritising the use of trees in agriculture to encourage healthier soils, better production and care for wildlife. The Code is directly involving the chocolate industry and gives the opportunity for large areas to be run for the benefit of producing cocoa so long as certain standards are met. It is an economic solution that offers promise, but given a tradition of informal land rights and a history of corruption and instability it will be viewed sceptically.