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### Smithsonian Bird Friendly Seal of Approval: The Most Effective Eco-Label Today

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, coffee farmers in Central America, desperate to improve the impoverished condition of their families, have capitalized on the growing demand for coffee. With the advent of inexpensive supermarket varieties and soluble instant blends, coffee has gone from luxury drink to beverage of the masses (Pendergrast 1). The actual price per pound has actually decreased from its global market peak in the mid 1940s; however, the increased demand has pushed growers to produce greater volumes of coffee to increase their profits (Pendergrast 1). Though coffee has traditionally been cultivated under the dense, tri-layer canopy of the native rainforest, growers have begun cutting down trees in their coffee fields to create more productive “sun” plantations (Ancinelli 23). Clear cutting trees in this manner has not only decreased biodiversity of plant species but has also destroyed the habitat of rainforest dwelling animals (Biacich 3).

One of the primary issues with researching the shift from shade to sun cultivation is how little data has been gathered on the rate and scope of this shift. Though it is known that over fifty million acres of rainforest are lost per year and as much as eighty percent of this loss is due to conversion to agricultural land (McKetterick 1), it is less clear how much of this land is converted to sun coffee plantations. As a result, it is difficult for scientists to gauge the amount of forest lost and form action plans to combat this destruction. Contrarily, studies regarding the effect on avian life of habitat loss due to existing coffee cultivation are abundant and conclusive:

when trees are cut down, habitat and food sources for native and migratory birds decrease, the number of birds and types of species dwindle and biodiversity levels in the plants these birds pollinate decrease in turn (Biacich 2). This decrease in floristic biodiversity further threatens the stability of remnant patches of rainforest that are often surrounded by agricultural land (Jha 2). Studies regarding the effect of bird pollination on rainforest diversity and the more central issue of the effect coffee habitat conversion has on avian diversity are still in progress today. The body of this work is taking place in Chiapas Mexico, though comparable studies have taken place in Brazil and Costa Rica.

In addition to destroying habitat for both native and migratory birds, the shift from bird friendly coffee habitats to barren sun plantations creates an even more troubling issue. As bird species are lost, the genetic flow of seeds and pollen usually created by avian foraging stops, and plant species are lost in turn (Jha 1). The loss of species richness in seed and pollen-bearing birds has become a matter of great concern to environmentalists and bird lovers alike. Programs around the globe have tried to combat the problem by implementing public awareness campaigns and creating incentive programs for “green” coffee growers. These programs have largely failed in their goals and the conversion to sun grown coffee remains a prominent factor in rainforest biodiversity loss. One of the reasons for this continuing loss is a lack of awareness on the part of the coffee drinking public. The majority of consumers do not realize that the method by which the coffee they drink is cultivated effects deforestation or species loss. This naiveté is evidenced by the fact that less than two percent of all coffee sold in America can be labeled as “specialty” or in some way supporting action for a social or environmental cause (Pendergrast 4). Thus far, the best solution offered for this ignorance is a practice called eco-labeling, a process by which

coffee growers are certified on the environmental merits of their cultivation so that buyers of their product can be assured that they are supporting conservationism (Heidkamp 1).

The most comprehensive eco-label today is the Smithsonian Bird Friendly Seal of Approval. In terms of coverage the Smithsonian label is clearly the best option. It provides the same pricing as many similar eco-labels, while also granting certifications that guarantee environmental accountability. It is also the only label that specifically addresses avian biodiversity loss. It attacks this problem at the source, supporting the reversion of sun coffee plantations to shade growth techniques, directly affecting the habitat available to birds, restoring biodiversity to both plant and avian life in coffee growing environments. The Smithsonian label is a triple certification that coffee is grown under a diverse shade canopy that supports local and migratory birds, without the use of pesticides. It also guarantees that the grower was paid a cost of living price for his beans (Smithsonian 1). This type of comprehensive coverage is more effective in creating environmental change because it addresses the issue of deforestation from many angles. The Smithsonian Seal is currently the only triple certification of its kind (Smithsonian 4). Smithsonian has developed stringent standards for both the density and diversity of the shade cover that must be present for the coffee beans produced to be labeled “Bird Friendly”. The shade cover must not only be dense enough to mirror surrounding native forests, but must also contain at least three layers of canopy diversity, diversity as measured in types and varieties of plants available to birds for foraging (Smithsonian 6).

The Smithsonian seal also includes the USDA Organic label as part of its certification. To receive this seal coffee must be grown without the use of specified synthetic and non-synthetic chemicals ([www.ams.usda.gov](http://www.ams.usda.gov)). This is beneficial for the birds affected by coffee cultivation because some of the chemicals used in non-organic cultivation can kill insect and

plant food sources or damage avian habitats (Biacich 3). The third aspect of the Bird Friendly Seal, fair wage payment, offers economic incentive to growers to choose less productive but environmentally friendly methods of shade cultivation. As stated by a prominent researcher in the field of avian behavior and its relation to agriculture, though shade cultivation has “a variety of external benefits... [these] externalities, however, are not expected to have observable land use impacts unless they are capitalized in the coffee market.” (Heidkamp 1). That is, if there is no monetary incentive, growers will not sacrifice productivity and profit for environmental benefits. Through their support of marginalized growers in conjunction with their shade certification, only Smithsonian’s label is addressing both the issues of species richness and the socio-economic standing of growers simultaneously.

There are many certifications currently circulating in the global coffee market; however, most focus on only one aspect of coffee cultivation. Though these other labels claim to support sustainability they have no concrete standards that control shade cover or deforestation. Another major eco-label, the Fair Trade label, addresses the economic conditions of growers by offering a minimum above market price--\$1.25 per pound compared to the average market price, \$0.78 to \$1.01 according to the Global Exchange Organization--to cooperatives of growers. They also offer a ten-cent per pound premium for organically certified coffee (Transfair 4). Fair Trade also has standards, which prohibit the use of certain harmful agrochemicals including some herbicides and insecticides ([www.fairtrade.net](http://www.fairtrade.net)). However, neither Fair-trade Labeling Organization International, the collective that certifies fair trade products globally, or Transfair USA, the private company that certifies products for sale in the United States, have any standards that address deforestation or shade production ([www.fairtrade.net](http://www.fairtrade.net)). Other labels, such as Rainforest Alliance have standards for water and chemical management and promote

polycultural growth “where practical” (Coffee Habitat 2), but do not have any direct standards for shade production. Only Smithsonian is attending to the problems of sun cultivation comprehensively by not only helping farmers economically, but also addressing the need for shade habitats directly.

The need for a label that ensures shade cover in cultivation is clear in terms of preserving avian biodiversity. However, this will only be feasible if a label that has preset criteria for shade growth is used. It can take years for new certifications to be created, streamlined and adopted by growers. The Fair-trade Labeling Organization International has been working since 2005 to add just two new commodities--handicrafts and decorative flowers--to their certification list ([www.fairtrade.net](http://www.fairtrade.net)). The only logical action is to expand the existing Smithsonian label to have a greater impact on the coffee distribution market. Smithsonian already has field procedures for certifying growers, including scientists who observe growing conditions and thirteen private organizations in nine countries that certify for the Bird Friendly Seal (Smithsonian 12). There are currently 1,992 farmers working in twenty-five certified co-operatives across 5,564 hectares (land measure equal to 2.27 acres) to produce 6,978,653 pounds of Bird Friendly certified coffee annually (Smithsonian 13). This level of production is proof that the system can be effective. Unfortunately, the amount of certified coffee grown comprises such a small fraction of the global market that great expansion will be necessary to make a real impact environmentally and economically. However, with standards for field operations set, the only step necessary to make Smithsonian’s seal effective on a larger scale is to expand current operations to encompass a greater share of the global coffee market.

The Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance labels have no standards or operation precedents to certify for shade growth. Creating these standards and mobilizing satellite organizations to

enforce them would be costly and time consuming. With rainforest habitat being lost at alarming rates, that precious time cannot be wasted. Instead, it would be beneficial for organizations like Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance to put their weight behind the Smithsonian label, using their advertising power as a widely recognized certification to promote the importance of shade habitat. A coalition of certifying organizations might instigate an even more rapid change by allowing other labels to use the standards set by Smithsonian to certify a greater number of farms and spread the influence of shade grown certification.

The primary flaw of the eco-labeling system is that it is not wide spread enough to make a meaningful impact on the way coffee is cultivated. In 2008 eco-friendly coffee accounted for less than two percent of coffee sales in America (Pendergrast 4). Additionally, growers cannot sell all of their crops at Fair Trade or Bird Friendly prices; the demand in the end product market is simply not high enough (Transfair 4). The following admission of deficiency is published on the Fair Trade website: "...since most cooperatives are only able to sell a portion of their harvest on Fair Trade terms, the final price received by members is often comprised of an average of all prices received throughout the year, including Fair Trade prices and lower conventional market prices, minus expenditures." This inability to sell the totality of product for specialty prices is further proof that demand for eco-labeled coffee must grow before the program can be truly transformational. For individual growers the extra income received from specialty coffee sales can sometimes be enough to improve their current farming conditions or provide education for their children (Transfair 6). In other cases the impact on farmers is minimal and cannot fully alleviate the poverty they experience; thus, specialty coffee has failed to effectively change markets and sometimes cannot even successfully change the lives of growers. There is a vicious cycle perpetuated by a lack of consumer knowledge and action coupled with the minimal amount

specialty coffee available. Demand for specialty coffee does not increase because there is not enough advertisement to impact public awareness. When the targeted issue becomes more specific, as it is with shade grown certification, effecting change becomes increasingly difficult.

Because shade certified coffee accounts for an even smaller part of the already nominal specialty market, its rate of expansion will need to be even greater to effect noticeable change. For shade based environmental certifications to become a viable option in the battle against sun grown coffee, there will need to be a public awareness campaign on a global scale to open the eyes of the general public to the problems surrounding the coffee they drink every day. Advertisement funding for all eco-labels must increase so that a better-informed and environmentally active public will be able to create a demand for specialty coffees. Only if consumers begin to actively demand coffee that supports the shade cultivation movement will programs like the Smithsonian Bird Friendly Seal of Approval help maintain biodiversity in birds and plants in places like Chiapas Mexico. To create this kind of global awareness Smithsonian will need to receive considerably greater funding to run ad campaigns and expand their certification operations. Large corporations adopting eco-friendly practices could provide that funding. Convincing large, for-profit companies to support environmental initiatives has always proven difficult; few capitalistic ventures are willing to sacrifice any significant profit for specialty causes and fewer still are willing to risk incorporating new products without assurance of consumer demand. However, the multi-national coffee house, Starbucks, is leading the way in terms of ecologically friendly business. Starbucks now purchases over 15,937,211 pounds of Fair Trade Certified coffee, over six percent of their total annual purchases (Transfair 14). If large-scale roasters and distributors such as Starbucks or Maxwell House showed this kind of support for Bird Friendly coffee, the impact would be monumental. Subsidization of shade grown coffee

could provide incentives for large companies to increase their purchases of this environmentally friendly crop. Tax exceptions for both importing and exporting nations as well as reductions of transport fees would be powerful motivators for corporations to support positive change. With time and increased public awareness, triple certifications such as the Smithsonian's Seal can reverse the effects of sun grown coffee and return biodiversity to the rainforest while supporting marginalized coffee growers that produce environmentally friendly beans.

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