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HOW MUCH CAN YOUR COFFEE HABITS AFFECT THE RAINFOREST?

October 31, 2013 · by Jonathan Silver · in Consumer Choices

How do your coffee drinking habits impact the rainforest? To answer that question, you need to know what kind of coffee you're drinking.

Do you know the difference between [sun-grown](#) and [shade-grown coffee](#)? Basically, sun-grown coffee grows much quicker and offers a higher yield than shade-grown coffee. Unfortunately, sun-grown coffee needs full sunlight, so rainforests are being clear-cut for this plant. Shade-grown coffee, as the name implies, does not require clear-cutting because it grows *within* the rainforest, underneath its shaded canopy, making it the more sustainable option.

If you're like me, you've unknowingly been drinking lots of sun-grown coffee and thus unknowingly contributing to the destruction of rainforests. How much destruction have you caused? This is an interesting question.

On the Jane Goodall Institute's coffee fact sheet (see image below), you'll read: "Every cup of coffee consumed destroys roughly 3cm² of rainforest". But that isn't very much destruction at all. Clearing away a 3 cm x 3 cm strip of rainforest floor isn't going to kill a big tree, it won't even kill a small tree, and it's not going to displace a bird's nest or a chimpanzee.

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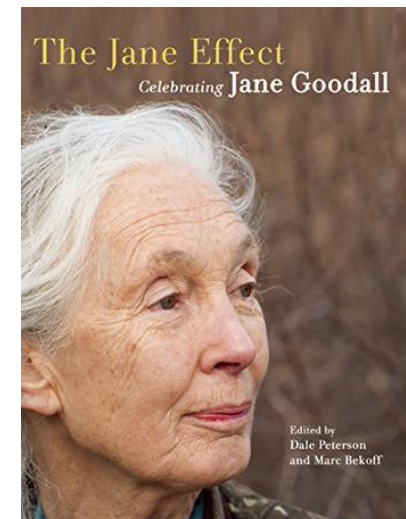
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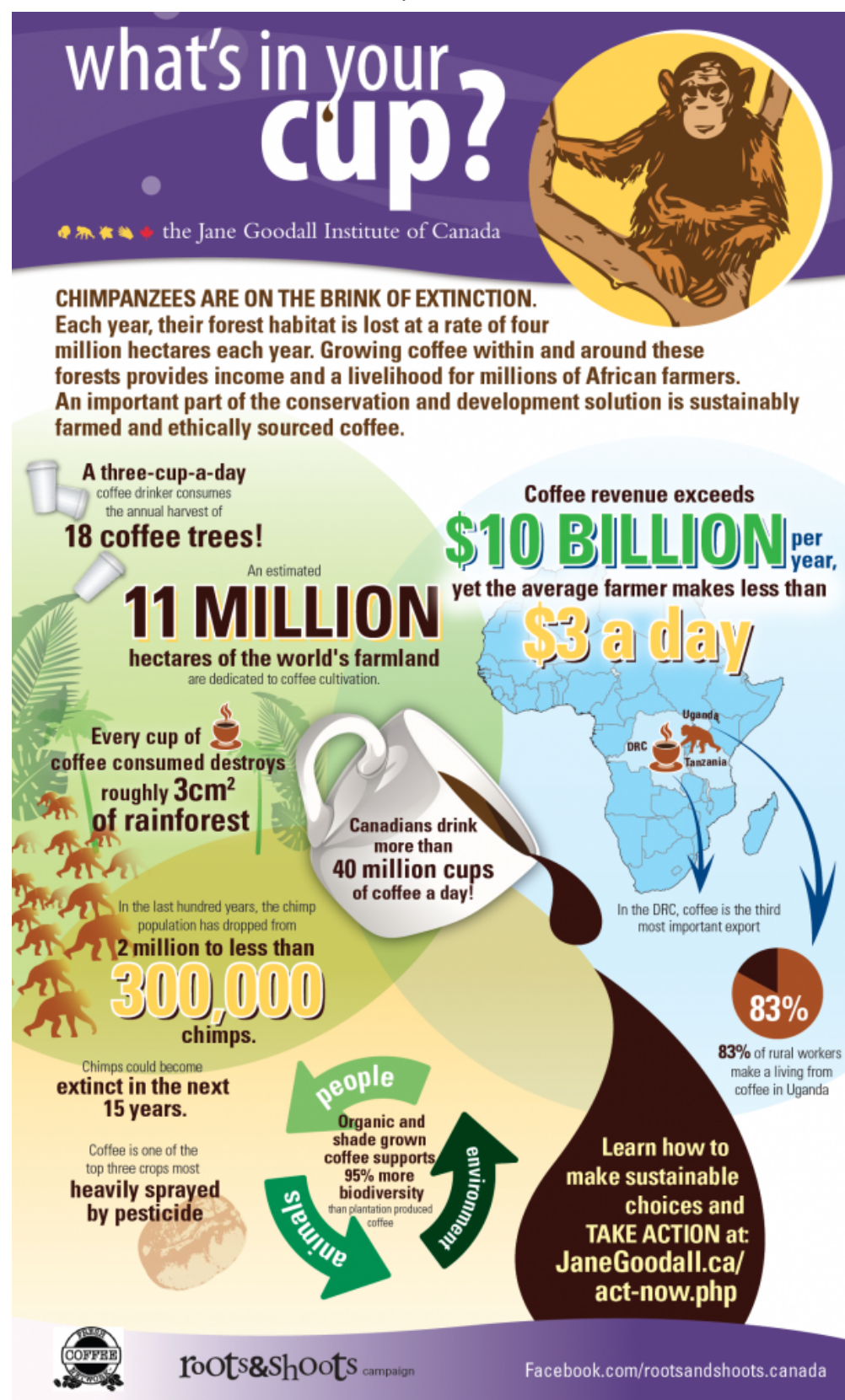
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Even adding together the damage you'd cause if you drank sun-grown coffee for a decade, it wouldn't be much. Moreover, that damage wouldn't be concentrated in a single area; it would be little 3cm² bits scattered across rainforests. So you could never be responsible for destroying a whole tree. It seems like no amount of sun-grown coffee you drink is going to cause significant destruction.

Well, you might say, suppose an old tree was cut down to make room for a coffee plant. Conceivably, we could then track down all the people who drank coffee from that plant and hold them each partly responsible for the tree's destruction.

But would you lose sleep if your cup of coffee was merely one of many thousands responsible for the destruction of an old tree? Perhaps you would if you think it's wrong to cause even a minuscule portion of destruction. You would then have reason to switch to shade-grown coffee. But this isn't something I'm losing sleep over.

If you're like me, you can see that it isn't easy to say why you alone should stop drinking sun-grown coffee even if doing so contributes to the destruction of rainforests. Individually, none of us causes significant destruction. Significant destruction is only caused when we look at a **group** of sun-grown coffee drinkers.

This is what some call 'a collective harm problem'. A collective harm problem arises when a large number of actions lead to bad consequences but the absence or presence of any single action doesn't seem to significantly change the outcome. In other words, there's rainforest destruction when Canadians collectively drink sun-grown coffee, but seemingly not when you as an individual drink the stuff.

Don't get your spirits down — I think there's still a good reason to switch to shade-grown coffee. Here's my solution to this collective harm problem:

We should realize that each of us is not an individual person performing isolated actions inside a vacuum. Instead, each of us lives in a social network where our actions influence the actions of other people. So switching to shade-grown coffee has the power to do more than just prevent the destruction of scattered 3cm² bits of rainforest. By making the switch you can influence others to do the same. These other people can, in turn, influence further people to make the switch. In short, your drinking shade-grown coffee does not by itself significantly help the rainforest, but it can influence enough people's actions which together add up to make a **big** difference.

To effectively influence others, don't just quietly opt for shade-grown coffee. Make a big deal about your decision. Encourage your family and friends to make the switch. If you want to go for a cup of coffee with a friend, suggest a spot that serves shade-grown coffee and, once there, explain what you've read today. Or lead by example and have shade-grown coffee at home for your guests. Or give a friend a jolt in the right direction and get them a bag of [the Jane Goodall Institute's Blend](#). Be sure to harness the influential sharing power of Facebook or Twitter to post articles, facts, and videos (check out [my last post](#) to see what I mean).

Don't think about how much your cups of coffee on their own alleviate or contribute to the destruction of the rainforest. Instead, think about how strongly your coffee drinking habits can influence your friends' and family's habits, and how their changed habits can influence the habits of others.

Make your next cup a strong one.

*This post has been inspired by Jonathan Glover and M J. Scott-Taggart's article: "It Makes No Difference Whether or Not I Do It." Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes. 49 (1975): 171-209. Print.

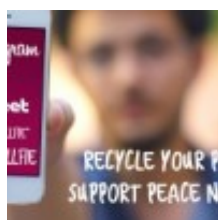
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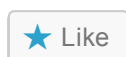
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