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Cheap coffee threatens to wipe out wildlife and ruin farmers

By **Steve Connor**, [Science Editor](#)

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Coffee farmers are being forced into poverty by falling prices and many are trying to maintain their livelihoods by increasing production of cheaper varieties of coffee at the expense of the environment.

Timothy O'Brien and Margaret Kinnaird, of the New York-based [Wildlife Conservation Society](#), said: "The crisis has serious repercussions for human livelihoods and biodiversity conservation."

Some of the rarest animals in the world, such as tigers, elephants, rhinoceroses, gibbons and orangutans of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, are threatened by the boom in coffee production over the past decade, the two scientists report in the journal *Science*.

Coffee production since the 1990s has increased at an average annual rate of 3.6 per cent, yet yearly consumption has risen only 1.5 per cent. The glut has led to the lowest wholesale prices in 100 years, which has tarnished coffee's image as a good cash crop for the developing world.

The crisis is forcing some coffee growers to abandon their farms to other crops or to livestock grazing, while others are expanding further into pristine rainforests where they grow a cheaper variety of coffee called robusta that is less environmentally friendly.

Dr O'Brien said: "Unlike [arabica coffee](#) that ripens and falls to the ground, robusta coffee ripens and remains on the branch, allowing for easier harvest. Robusta coffee forms the bulk of most inexpensive coffees. It is used in instant coffee and in flavoured coffees."

He said that over the past decade coffee growing had experienced a market free-for-all that had undermined attempts at sustainable growing that benefited growers and the local wildlife.

"Most attribute the coffee crisis to a rapid expansion of production worldwide, but especially in Vietnam and Indonesia during the 1990s," he said. "Vietnam had no coffee industry in the early 1980s but coffee production has grown exponentially since 1985. Indonesia meanwhile has also rapidly increased production."

Dr O'Brien and his wife, Dr Kinnaird, have studied the impact of coffee growing on one of the world's most important lowland tropical forests, the Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park in the Lampung province of southern Sumatra. Indonesia is the fourth-largest coffee producer in the world and about 70 per cent of Lampung's coffee production takes place inside and adjacent to the national park.

"Plans to expand Lampung's coffee production will almost certainly target forest inside the park and result in increased threats to large mammals," Dr O'Brien says in his report.

The park has already suffered from the trend towards the cheaper robusta variety, which is usually grown in full sunshine with little or no shade provided by indigenous shrubs and trees. Arabica is best grown in the shade – a more environmentally friendly method of production. Indonesia has now become the second largest producer of robusta, exceeded only by Vietnam.

"Since 1985, the park has lost more than 28 per cent of its forest, mostly to agricultural conversion for robusta coffee," the scientists write.

"Deforestation rates inside the national park are directly related to the price of coffee paid to farmers; during peak prices, deforestation rates double as farmers and outside speculators clear additional forest in hopes of a quick profit," they say.

Dr Kinnaird has found that large mammals, notably the Sumatran tiger, rhino and elephant, avoid forest boundaries by up to three kilometres (1.9 miles). This means that they are disproportionately affected by deforestation because their available safe habitat, an area smaller than that encircled by the forest boundary, is dwindling faster than the rate of forest [clearance](#). "We are really afraid of losing most of the secure forest habitat for these animals in the next 20 years," Dr O'Brien said.

The International Coffee Organisation in London said that in 2001 Britain imported 167,000 bags (10,000 tons) of coffee from Indonesia and most of that would have been robusta coffee destined to be made into instant coffee.

One answer to the crisis was for consumers to drink more fair-trade coffee, which paid a higher price to growers and encouraged them to use sustainable farming methods, Dr O'Brien said.

He also wanted new international trade agreements to be brokered by the United States, the biggest coffee consumer, to keep prices above poverty levels, he added.

"The free-market, free-for-all seen in the past decade is not the model to follow. We need new trade agreements to stabilise prices and we all need to be prepared to pay a little more for coffee.

"At the very least, reduction of coffee grown in national parks will help to attain conservation objectives. If we do not act soon, our next cup of java may have the bitter taste of extinction."