

# EXPLORING THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

DO COMMODITY BOYCOTTS STOP DEFORESTATION?

BART W VAN ASSEN

Quality Panel Member, HCV Network

Quality Panel Member, HCS Approach

Technical Advisor, RSPO Complaints Panel



## THE BOYCOTT GENERATION

sustainable cultivation 'does not actually stop tropical #deforestation' (Palm Oil Detectives, 2023)

half a century of boycotts over tropical deforestation:

- 80s/90s: tropical timber boycotts
- 90s/00s: paper & pulp boycotts
- 10s/20s: palm oil boycotts

results:

- brand boycotts (Barclays, Kellogg's, Tesco, etc): high impact?
- country boycotts (China, Iran, Israel, etc): medium impact?
- commodity boycotts: low impact?

“

Boycotts convince concerned consumers that they are contributing to a solution when in all likelihood they are not.

”

Willie 1991

- sustainable cultivation 'does not actually stop tropical deforestation'
- commodity boycotts also do not actually stop tropical deforestation

## FALSE DILEMMA

palm oil equals deforestation

often applied by spin doctors paid to promote (read greenwash) competing commodities

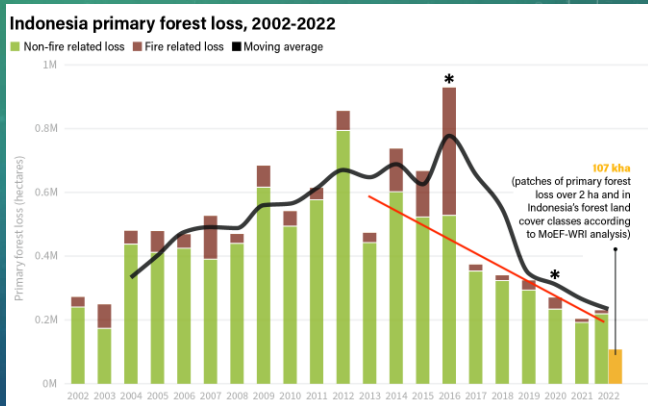


<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3924762334207508&set=pcb.3924766227540452>

## BOYCOTTS VERSUS DEFORESTATION

Did boycotts contribute to the 2012/2016 decline in Indonesia's primary forest loss?

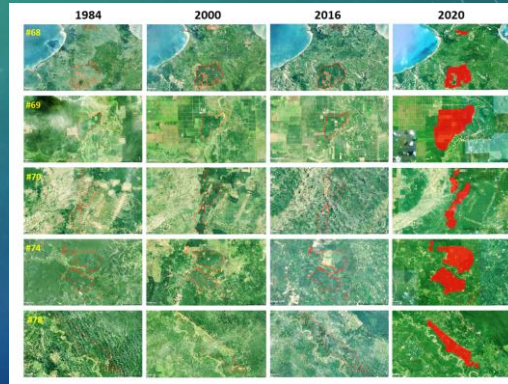
2014-2015 and 2019 wildfires are a major driver of primary forest loss



<https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/IDN/>

## BOYCOTTS HAVE A LOW IMPACT ON FOREST LOSS

- 2023: experts attribute Indonesia's impressive track record in slowing forest loss to stricter clearance permits, unusually wet weather and declining palm oil prices<sup>1</sup>
- 2021: oil palm expansion occurred mainly on abandoned lands and secondary forests<sup>2</sup>
- 2020: boycotts are 'highly successful' in generating 'negative public opinions'<sup>3</sup>
- 1991: 'boycotts convince concerned consumers that they are contributing to a solution when in all likelihood they are not'<sup>4</sup>
- the Pretty Earth Fallacy<sup>2</sup> is a key tool supporting the flawed claims about deforestation



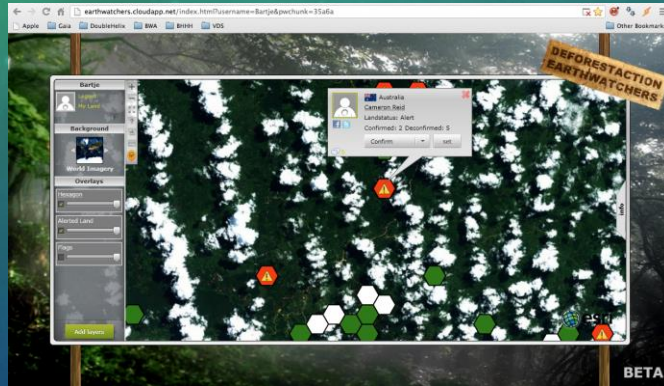
Gatti & Velichevskaya (2020)<sup>3</sup>

## PRETTY EARTH FALLACY

THE FLAWED ASSUMPTION THAT (DARK) GREEN = (VIRGIN) FOREST



## CASE 1: EARTHWATCHERS



## CASE 2: MONITORING DEFORESTATION IN BRAZIL

green "forest" ...



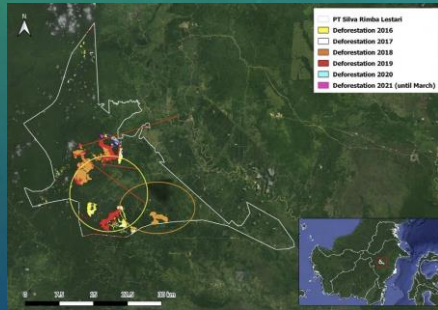
... converted for agriculture



[www.aidenvironment.org/2019/06/27/monitoring-deforestation-in-brazil/](http://www.aidenvironment.org/2019/06/27/monitoring-deforestation-in-brazil/)

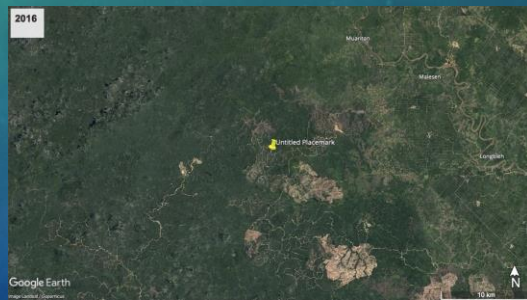
## CASE 3: SILVA RIMBA LESTARI (EAST KALIMANTAN)

2018 “deforestation” ...



Aidenvironment (2021) The need for cross commodity no deforestation policies

... was cleared 2013-2016?



Google Earth Pro (2021)

“ Indonesia’s ministry has forest cover maps. They are the basis of our deforestation claims, but we also do an extra check visually. For checking visually, we usually look whether Google Earth has high-res imagery, or we look at the Here maps of Apple. And then we look at tree cover, canopy density, variety of colours, matured/young trees, next to all other info we can gather. ”

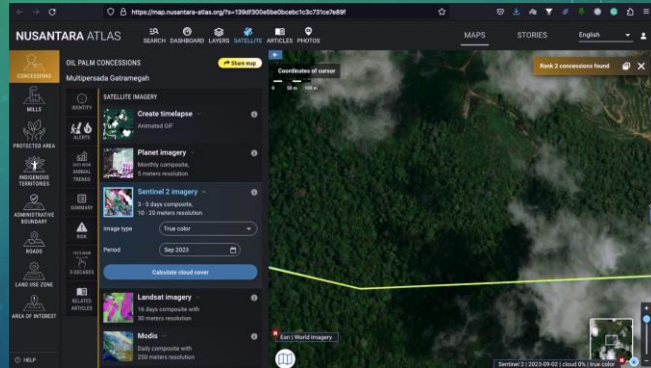
Aidenvironment researcher (2021)

the absence of 1) satellite imagery, 2) tools for their interpretation and 3) field verification in this study may have resulted in the ‘Pretty Earth Fallacy’

## TOWARDS CREDIBLE OSINT

### Nusantara Atlas:

- weekly Global Land Analysis & Discovery (GLAD) from GFW
- bi-weekly Radar for Detecting Deforestation (RADD) from ESA
- feedback from practitioners



## CONCLUSIONS

### towards credible OSINT

- [commodity] boycotts convince concerned consumers that they are contributing to a solution when in all [certainty] they are not (after Willie, 1991)
- often applied by marketeers to greenwash their goods and services
- OSINT often misused to suggest tropical deforestation
- urgent need for proper field verification
- towards a short-list of credible OSINT providers