

Coffee

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Did you know?

To put in perspective the importance of coffee to world trade, consider this figure: 15,444,000,000 lbs of coffee were consumed worldwide in 2006 (Fairtrade Canada, 2009). The coffee trade is an \$80-billion industry, making it the second highest traded commodity behind oil. However, it has failed to adequately provide fair profit-sharing for coffee growers in developing countries (UN Chronicle, 2009).

Minimum Sustainable Recommendations

Request vendors supply coffee that is:

- Shade grown
- Certified organic and
- Fair Trade Certified

Other things to consider

In addition to the specifications noted above, consider using other Fair Trade certified consumables such sugar, tea and cocoa.

What are the issues?

There are many economic, social and environmental issues associated with growing coffee, including habitat degradation, pollution and unfair remuneration for coffee growers.

Coffee growing consumes large quantities of water. It is estimated that 140 litres of water is needed to grow enough coffee beans for one cup of coffee (New Scientist, 2006). The use of pesticides is also prevalent in coffee growing and these chemicals can contaminate soil and groundwater and be harmful to human health. Another significant environmental issue is the deforestation and habitat loss that occurs to create sun grown coffee plantations.

While coffee was traditionally grown in the shade, amongst a canopy of diverse trees, new higher-yielding sun-loving hybrid varieties of coffee were developed in the 1970's. Developing a "Sun-coffee" plantation entails thinning out the native trees in order to make more room for the actual coffee plants. Along with deforestation, sun-grown coffee plantations result in soil erosion, require significant amounts of pesticide and herbicide use, and cause water runoff. The transition to sun-grown coffee in many locations such as Latin America has been a great concern to ornithologists who believe that the deforestation required for sun-grown coffee has resulted in the loss of countless birds who once lived in the trees.

While the environmental impacts of coffee production are many, so are the social impacts. It is true that coffee is big business and remains one of the most valuable products in world trade. However, many of the world's coffee farmers do not benefit economically from its international trade. The price for coffee fluctuates wildly on the world market, making it difficult for farmers to make a good living from year to year. In addition, many coffee farmers do not have access to direct markets and must sell to a middleman, often at a price that does not cover the costs of their production.

This document contains key considerations and suggestions for sustainable specifications and standards. Use of these specifications are intended to be guidelines for public sector procurers. Mention of any company name or product does not constitute or imply endorsement.

What are the options?

Today there are many purchasing options available to consumers that help to reduce the environmental and social impacts associated with coffee production. Shade grown coffee varieties are available to consumers. Selection of shade grown coffee supports sustainable coffee production.

In addition, consumers can select Fair trade certified coffee to support better trading conditions for coffee producers and workers in developing countries.

Under Fair Trade certification, organizations work directly with cooperatives of small farmers to eliminate much of the middleman costs and provide the growers with a stable price that ensures a reasonable standard of living. The international fair trade standard for coffee also includes environmental standards to restrict the use of agrochemicals (85% of fair trade coffees are also organic) and encourage sustainability and a social premium (included in the purchase price) to be used by the cooperative for social and economic investment in the community (e.g., education and health services).

Fairtrade Canada at <http://fairtrade.ca/> provides additional information on this third party certification and the variety of products available under the fair trade system. In addition, the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation (MCIC) program "Fair Trade Manitoba" has created a website at www.fairtrademanitoba.ca which provides information on fair trade products and events, and a shopping guide of local businesses that supply fair trade products in Manitoba.

References

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