

One-page summary for Zoos Victoria – 4 Dec 2010

Research led by Professor Jill Klein of Melbourne Business School and conducted in coordination with Zoos Victoria suggests that consumers' ability to diagnose whether a product contains palm oil or not is the largest driver of whether they actually do purchase the product.

In a series of experiments performed at the Melbourne Zoo between April and June 2010, zoo visitors were asked to select between a food product that did not contain palm oil and a virtually equivalent alternative that contained vegetable oil. According to current FSANZ regulations, palm oil does not have to be labeled as such on food product packaging, but instead may be included on the list of ingredients under the term "vegetable oil". Therefore, it is uncertain whether a product that is made with vegetable oil contains palm oil as a raw ingredient in its manufacture.

In one study, 118 zoo visitors were asked to choose a bag of either Red Rock potato chips, made with sunflower oil, or Smith's potato chips, made with vegetable oil. Surveys containing a battery of questions asking about personal views on issues such as ethical consumption, wildlife preservation, political activism, and human-like characteristics of primates were administered to participants either before or after they made their potato chip selection. In addition, three different conditions were tested during the experiment, whereby participants had to make their selection either (1) without any additional information, (2) with a large sticker placed on the Red Rock packaging to indicate that no palm oil was used in its production, or (3) an informational sheet placed near the potato chips that listed which brand of potato chips (and other types of foods) were made with and without palm oil. The large sticker was composed of an image of a baby orangutan's face, accompanied by the words "Orangutan-friendly – No Palm Oil". The informational sheet listed three product categories (potato chips, fruit bars, and soap) and an indication, for each product category, of which brands do and do not contain palm oil (Smith's and Red Rock respectively for potato chips; Kellogg's and Woolworth's Select for fruit bars; Imperial Leather and Dove respectively for soap).

Results show that whether there was a sticker, an informational sheet, or no additional information at all had an effect on whether the Red Rock potato chips were selected. When participants were asked to make their selection in the 'sticker' and 'informational sheet' conditions, the proportion of participants choosing the Red Rock chips was higher, at a statistically significant level.

In a follow-up study, 96 zoo visitors had to select either a Woolworth Select's fruit bar, made with canola oil, or a Kellogg's K-Time Twists fruit bar containing palm oil (which is explicitly indicated on that product's list of ingredients). Participants were given the same surveys as those used in the previous study, and again these were completed either before or after participants made their fruit bar selection. Furthermore, after fruit bar selection and survey completion, the participants were asked during the debriefing if they knew whether their selected fruit bar contained palm oil. The three different experiment conditions (no additional information, sticker on the packaging, informational sheet near the fruit bars) were repeated in this study as well.

An analysis of the data collected in this follow-up study reveals that whether participants were able to diagnose if their selected fruit bar contained palm oil was the

leading driver in product choice. Those who believed that they knew whether their selected fruit bar contained palm oil or not were more likely to select the Woolworth's bar than those who said they did not know whether their fruit bar had palm oil. The presence of a stimulus (either the sticker on the product packaging or the informational sheet) was the second most important factor in selecting the Woolworth's bar. These results suggest that allowing consumers to determine easily whether palm oil is an ingredient used in the food product under consideration, along with increasing awareness of the palm oil issue among consumers, are the two most significant factors in purchasing the ethical version of the item.

In this study, males were more likely than females to select the Woolworth Select's bar; further research might investigate whether it can be generalised further that gender plays some role in selecting ethical products, and if so, under what scenarios. Additional experiments may also help uncover whether one type of stimulus (stickers on the product packaging or information at the point of purchase) is more effective than the other in aiding consumers to diagnose palm oil content in products, and if so, in what design formats. Also worthy of note is the result that consumers' views on ethical consumption, wildlife preservation, political activism, or the humanisation of primates did not have any statistically significant effect on choosing the palm oil-free version of the product.