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COMMUNICATING PEAT SCIENCE TO SOCIETY

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Humanity currently requires all available natural resources, both renewable and non-renewable be managed optimally and sustainably. Peatlands is one such resource and historically mankind has excavated and exploited peat for fuel and use as arable land for agriculture and forestry. Peatlands have vital ecological functions, support biodiversity and functions as a carbon depository. In the process of exploiting peat and its associated natural resources, it is inevitable that land use change and other environmental impacts arise, especially when poorly managed. The cultivation of oil palm has been targeted as a major cause of deforestation and increases in greenhouse gas emissions especially when peatlands are exploited for this agriculture activity. While the scientific community has been quick to rally against palm oil and plays a major role in shaping lay consumer opinions, it begs the question of whether science has done this responsibly and in an unbiased manner. To the lay person, peat today is solely a tropical issue and consumer perception about peat is extremely lopsided largely due to a variety of communication tools used to sell a one-sided story. Science unfortunately does not communicate a balanced picture, especially regarding Europe having exploited its peatlands and literally fueling its economy while providing arable land for Europe's forestry, agriculture and horticulture sectors. Some of these sectors have remained key pillars in Europe's economy. On the other hand peat exploitation in developing countries especially when cultivated under oil palm is highlighted as the curse of the tropics that critically endangers the environment and contributes to GHG emissions and biodiversity losses. Sadly, scientific outputs from most developing countries, even when they meet peer-review standards, are frowned upon unless they agree with established perceptions about the damages brought about due to peat disturbances. If the peat debate is to be managed and won for the overall benefit of mankind, it is highly desirable that scientific experts, legislators, media, industry and lay-consumers engage in unbiased assessment of the facts rather than play on emotions. Thus communicating the correct messages should become the responsibility of all those concerned and involved in the management and exploitation of peat in any part of the world and not just the tropical belts alone.

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