



# This Green Life

A Journal of Sorts



**Chocoholics Unite!**

**February 2006**

I have great news for all you chocolate lovers out there: research shows that chocolate may not only be good for your health but the environment, too. Sounds like I'm pulling an April Fool's joke, right? But it's Valentine season and, in the spirit of the holiday, I mean to be both sweet and true.



Yes, my recommendation this month is that you indulge...for the sake of the tropical rainforest.

If you've read about the child slave labor on cacao plantations in the Ivory Coast, where almost half the world's chocolate originates, you may be surprised to hear that any good could possibly be associated with chocolate. And indeed, if those plantations were the only source of chocolate, I'd be urging you to swear it off altogether. But there's a different kind of cacao farming going on in parts of the Americas that is beneficial on several counts.

As you may already know, tropical rainforests are the most productive ecosystems on earth, constituting just two percent of its surface area, while containing half or more of its species. In addition, they help regulate the earth's climate and serve as the "lungs of the world," absorbing carbon dioxide (the main global warming gas) and transforming it into oxygen. They're also responsible for much of the planet's fresh water.

In short, where would we be without them?

Overdevelopment may soon show us. Logging, mining, oil and hydropower development, ranching and farming are currently eating up two football fields' worth of rainforest per second. At that rate, according to scientists who've done the math, we'll have none left in 50 years or, some say, less.

This is where satisfying your chocolate habit comes in to save the day.

Understand first that much of the remaining tropical rainforest will likely be put to some economic use. We simply have no power to stop it. On the other hand, we *can* support benign uses over destructive ones. Farming cacao, the tree that produces the raw ingredient for chocolate, is one of the most benign -- or can be, when done right.

Here's why: cacao is a shade-tolerant species, so it's not necessary to clear the rainforest in order to grow the crop. Of course, much of the cacao farming done today does involve significant clearing, but not total destruction. Taller trees are often left standing to provide the needed canopy. Moreover, the cacao is often planted alongside other crops, such as corn and bananas, on polycultural farms (where more than one type of plant is cultivated), which helps to create a simplified ecosystem of sorts. "Rustic" farmers go one step better -- they actually plant the crop in thinned rainforest.



**Sheryl Eisenberg**, a long-time advisor to NRDC, posts a new This Green Life every month. Sheryl makes her home in Tribeca (NYC), where—along with her children, Sophie and Gabby, and husband, Peter—she tries to put her environmental principles into practice. No fooling.



**The cacao pod** contains 30 to 40 seeds, from which chocolate is made. When the fat, or cocoa butter, is removed from the preparation, the result is cocoa powder. White chocolate is like cocoa in reverse. It uses the butter without the chocolate solids.

**False rumors!** There's no evidence that chocolate leads to acne. Nor does it cause cavities, though the sugar mixed with it does. It doesn't seem to be addictive either, at least not in a chemical sense. Bad for the heart? Chocolate contains flavonoids, which are beneficial for the cardiovascular system. And though high in fat, it raises good cholesterol levels, not bad.

So is chocolate good for you? Let's just say it contains good substances, but probably not enough to do any good. You could do worse with other treats, but better with vegetables.

Is chocolate an aphrodisiac? Not likely, but there's some indication it can elevate your mood -- and the mood of the one you give it to. Sometimes a little boost is all you need.

Both types of farms -- rustic and polycultural -- provide habitat that may be almost as good as the real thing for at least some types of wildlife. In a study conducted recently by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center in Panama, for instance, researchers found a richer diversity of bird life on shade plantations than nearby natural forests. The plantations had 184 species and 603 birds compared to the forests' 144 species and 646 birds.

Now, I don't want to paint too rosy a picture. Cacao farming is also done on monocultural plantations with "sun" hybrids developed in the '70s. This kind of farming does involve deforestation as well as heavy use of chemicals. However, it hasn't come to dominate for a variety of reasons. One is that most farmers are small producers without the financial resources to make chemically dependent farming work. Another is that sun plantations don't always fare so well. Not only are their trees extremely vulnerable to pests, they aren't particularly fertile. We can thank the midges responsible for cacao fertilizing for that. It seems they don't like coming out of their rainforest home to feed on those arid plantations.

But even when it comes to shade plantations, all are not equal. Where some are virtual outposts of the rainforest, others are deforested plots that have been replanted with just one kind of shade tree, which hardly makes for healthy habitat. And where some growers farm organically, others make more or less use of pesticides.

So, when you feed your chocolate habit, make sure you get the right kind of chocolate. It will not be the candy you find at your corner store. The big three chocolate makers -- M&M/Mars, Hershey's and Nestle's -- all use Ivory Coast cocoa. Therefore, any chocolate you buy from them, no matter how pure environmentally, is potentially tainted by slave labor.

The chocolate to look for is organic and "Fair Trade" -- and bears labels certifying both. The organic label verifies that the cacao was farmed in an environmentally sustainable way, while the Fair Trade label guarantees that farmers were paid a minimum price for their product. Without Fair Trade guarantees, small cacao growers are at the mercy of the market. When world cacao prices dip too low, as they have these past 10 years, growers can't make a living wage. Not only is that unacceptable from a human rights perspective, it also increases the likelihood that they'll shift their land to more profitable -- and destructive -- uses, such as cattle ranching.

Organic, Fair Trade chocolate is easy to find online. Just point your browser to one of the sites recommended under "Resources." To find it in the physical world, try the Whole Foods chain or a local gourmet or health food store.

Now that you know what to get, go make yourself happy -- and do your part to save the rainforest, one delicious bite at a time.

—Sheryl Eisenberg

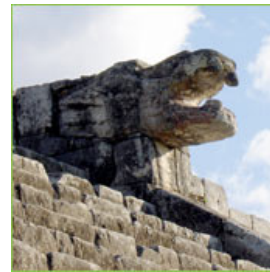
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**Sheryl Eisenberg** is a web developer and writer. With her firm, Mixit Productions (<http://www.mixitproductions.com>), she brought NRDC online in 1996, designed NRDC's first websites, and continues to develop special web features for NRDC. She created and, for several years, wrote the Union of Concerned Scientists' green living column, *Greentips*, and has designed and contributed content to many non-profit sites.  
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#### ONLINE RESOURCES

EXPLORATORIUM: The Sweet Lure of Chocolate - [http://www.exploratorium.edu/exploring/exploring\\_chocolate/](http://www.exploratorium.edu/exploring/exploring_chocolate/)  
CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES: Chocolate: the Exhibition - <http://www.calacademy.org/naturalhistory/chocolate.cfm>  
MSNBC: Is Chocolate Good for You? - <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/7339594/>  
SMITHSONIAN: Shade Grown Cacao - <http://nationalzoo.si.edu/ConservationAndScience/MigratoryBirds/Research/Cacao/>  
NATURAL HISTORY: The Chocolate Tree - [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1134/is\\_6\\_112/ai\\_105371465](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1134/is_6_112/ai_105371465)  
GLOBAL EXCHANGE: The Chocolate Industry - <http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/fairtrade/cocoa/background.html>  
GLOBAL EXCHANGE: Fair Trade Online Store - <http://store.gxonlinestore.org/chocolate.html>  
TRANSFAIR USA: Find Fair Trade Products - <http://www.transfairusa.org/do/whereToBuy>



*The yellow-tailed oriole* is one species found on cocoa plantations in research conducted by the Smithsonian.



*Quetzalcoatl*, the Mayan and Aztec feathered serpent god, was said to be the source of the cacao tree. MesoAmericans only consumed chocolate in liquid form, often with spices added. It was first sweetened with sugar by the Spanish.

**Unchocolate bars?** Cheaper bars consist mostly of sugar, milk and other additives, with very little chocolate in the mix. The higher the chocolate content, the less sweet and more complex the taste. On packaging for high-end bars, the percentage of chocolate is often listed, along with the place of origin. For instance, Dagoba's organic, Fair Trade bar is called Conacado 73%, indicating it's made with 73 percent chocolate from the Conacado Cooperative in the Dominican Republic.

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