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## [Podcast: Women of the Chiapas coast facing oil palm](#)

Women's organizations in the state of Chiapas, in southern Mexico, are leading a struggle to stop the advance of oil palm monocultures. These plantations invade fertile lands where communities grow food and raise animals. They also consume large quantities of water and pollute the environment, causing scarcity and disease.

The expansion of these plantations [began at the end of the 1990s](#), driven by companies in this sector in collusion with governments. Today, around 44 percent of all the oil palm grown in Mexico is in the state of Chiapas. One of the expansion techniques involves getting peasant families to sign contracts in which they agree to produce palm on their lands—which has brought many more problems than benefits to the communities.

In this podcast, produced by Women of the Chiapas Coast Against Oil Palm and Coastal Women in Rebellion, in collaboration with WRM, members of these organizations talk about the impacts of this monoculture crop and about their struggle. Their names are omitted for their safety.

We invite you to listen and share.

### **English transcription:**

**Host:** a production by Coastal Women in Rebellion, who are in a network to defend life and the territories. In collaboration with the World Rainforest Movement.

**Host:** We travel to Mexico, to the coast of Chiapas: a region with beaches and mangroves bathed by the waters of the Pacific, waters that coexist with the flora and fauna of fields and hills. A land where women build their reality and defend the land.

**Woman interviewed 1:** How did we start to fight? First, by understanding our problems and recognizing what we are experiencing and suffering from; and by sharing our experiences—what is happening in our communities, what is happening in our homes, what is happening in our territories, how we are fighting;—and by getting to know other spaces.

**Host:** The state of Chiapas, in southern Mexico, accounts for about 44 percent of the total area of oil palm in Mexico, with almost 50,000 planted hectares. Currently, in the coastal region of Soconusco alone, oil palm covers about 30,000 hectares, making Soconusco the largest growing area for this monoculture. We spoke with the Coastal Women in Rebellion, who explain the impacts of palm in their territory and tell us about their struggle.

**Woman interviewed 2:** Here on the coast, we women are now being invaded by oil palm, as they call it. We are realizing that it harms the earth, and not just the land but also the environment. Where they process the coquillo (manufacture of flour from the kernel of the palm's fruit), all of that ash that falls is harmful to our health.

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**Host:** Oil palm monoculture began to expand in Chiapas at the end of the 1990s, with a strong push from the State and companies in the sector. Through the use of economic subsidies, free plants and promises that they would obtain great economic benefits, peasant families were encouraged to plant oil palm on their lands and sign contracts with the companies.

**Woman interviewed 3:** The African palm is harming us and taking away our water; it is jeopardizing our plots; the cattle are going thirsty. We can no longer grow any other kind of plant, it has to be strictly oil palm; there are no other fruits besides this. In the palm groves you can't find any plant other than palm, palm, palm, palm. The cattle are now in a place that's far away.

**Woman interviewed 1:** Well, what we have seen, in terms of impacts in the territories, is that most of the palm trees planted have been close to rivers. That river was a very powerful river five years ago. Currently that river is dry; it is contaminated; it has a lot of grease, a lot of "cream" as they call it (they don't call it grease), a cream with something oily like petroleum on top that travels through the earth's veins and the tributaries and reaches the wells of people's homes. And that cream grows in the wells and then we can't use the water even to wash our clothes, much less to drink.

**Woman interviewed 2:** We can no longer harvest the crops like we did before, because the soil has become very dry; that plant [palm] absorbs too much water.

**Host:** Since the first years of cultivation, this crop has contaminated the rivers, streams and springs close to the palm groves. This is due to the use of agrochemicals, which cause diseases that double and triple the caretaking work that women who live near these crops have to do. Additionally, it affects their access to water for domestic consumption, personal hygiene, food preparation and washing clothes.

**Woman interviewed 3:** Due to the chemicals, if we drink that water that has chemicals and everything in it, of course we get sick with cancer, we get skin sicknesses and other ailments in the body.

**Woman interviewed 1:** It brings a lot of diseases to our body, such as depression and high blood pressure. Our body feels it, doesn't it? And especially when there is so much contamination in the water—like plastic, trash, waste, run-off.

**Woman interviewed 3:** Because (some people) think that burning an African palm orchard is enough to kill it. Others don't think this; they've found out that they have to make a hole in the middle of the plant and pour chemicals on it. And when the chemical is poured on the plant, it goes directly to the roots so that it dies. And those roots...where are they? They are connected to the rivers, and many of us still drink water from the rivers, from the springs. And that's why I also think we are making ourselves really sick when we kill the palm plant—because it creates a very thick carpet, a super bushy carpet that does not allow the water to go through. That carpet is soaking up all the water; it is absorbing it.

**Host:** The effects on the availability and quality of water are related not only to the expansion of plantations but also to the processing of the crude oil. In Chiapas there are eleven processors of crude palm oil, which is later refined into vegetable oil at plants located in the states of Veracruz and Jalisco. Each one of those crude oil processing plants foments the planting and expansion of more palm trees.

**Woman interviewed 3:** We are traveling through many places where they still are planning to grow

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these palm trees, and we are providing videos [to communities] to show them how everything is, how it affects them. They thought they'd make a lot of money at first, and they are paying \$0,11 per kilo of fruits they take out...and it's a lot of work on top of that!

**Woman interviewed 1:** We are raising awareness so that people can see the negative aspects that these mega-projects bring in terms of health, contamination and the environment. But they have also told us that it is not enough for them to pull out the trees, because the roots are there and so deep below the earth that they are woven together like a very strong rucksack. They keep sucking water. And so we raise awareness among people to tell them that this is not the way to obtain economic resources...on the contrary. That money that they think they'll have will not be enough when they get a major disease caused by all the contamination that the palm plantations bring, right?

**Woman interviewed 2:** (Hearing the experience of) the person who already harvested and who finally realized, twenty years later, all the harm that palm causes helps us draw a comparison. And now we reaffirm and say NO, WE DO NOT ACCEPT PALM, we are against palm.

**Woman interviewed 1:** Well, I would just like to invite all the women to keep organizing. We must not give up. We believe that our fight is for life, and we have to keep going.

**Host:** The organized women's struggle against the agro-extractive oil palm model stems not only from their effort to eradicate this monoculture crop, but also from their pursuit for equal participation in decision-making on their territories, lands, production, lives and bodies.

**Host:** This has been a production of Women of the Chiapas Coast Against Oil Palm and Coastal Women in Rebellion, who are in a network to defend life and the territories. In collaboration with the World Rainforest Movement.