

# Is shade-grown coffee truly sustainable?

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## Important Issues

- What social implications are important when considering shade-grown coffee?
- How does shade-grown coffee affect the environment?
- What current policies affect shade-grown coffee?
- How does consumer awareness influence the shade-grown coffee industry?

## Key Terms

- Sun-grown coffee:** High-yielding, sun tolerant coffee plants that require intense sunlight to grow. This type of agriculture replaced many traditional shade operations in the 1970's during the "Green Revolution" and its main draw is the production of more coffee in a shorter period of time.
- Shade-grown coffee:** Lower-yielding coffee plants grown under cover of shade provided by other species of plants. Specific definitions for certification are controversial as the number of shade-trees planted can vary from farm to farm. What constitutes a "shade-grown" coffee farm is one of the most complicated issues in sustainable coffee.

## Social & Historical Aspects

- Colonialism and slavery were common in many coffee growing areas in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the remnants of this system are still in place today in the coffee industry
  - Unfavorable labor standards in coffee producing nations
  - Dependence on industrialized nations, as coffee is exported
  - Standards generally dictated by industrialized nations
  - Economically unstable industry, prices are currently very low

## Environmental Aspects

- A sun-grown coffee farm is not a diverse ecosystem, as it is an intensive monoculture
  - Dangerous pesticides, many of which have been outlawed in industrialized nations, are used, most of the time without regard for recommended amounts or procedures
  - Byproducts include deforestation, soil erosion, chemical runoff, and habitat destruction
- Shade coffee, in a rustic or traditional farm with a variety of shade tree species, provides habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals, as this is the way coffee grows naturally
  - Helps to promote biodiversity and provides animal habitat
  - Balance of the ecosystem helps to naturally repel pests—harmful pesticides are not usually needed
  - Land is used for forest rather than clear-cutting for agriculture
  - Forests are carbon sinks—help to counteract global warming

## Current Policies & Practices

- There is no standard set of regulations when it comes to shade-grown coffee, there are various certifications from various organizations.
- Inconsistencies in certification lead to problems
  - No price premiums for farmers
  - Certifications do not need to have common philosophies
  - Not much consumer knowledge or opportunities for education
  - Regulations largely determined by industrialized nations
  - Considered separate from socially conscious coffee

## What Can Be Done?

- Consolidation of fair trade and shade-grown coffee could ensure that farmers have adequate living standards while also protecting the environment. These social and environmental considerations need to go hand in hand for sustainable coffee to exist.
  - Those in poverty cannot afford to worry about environmental aspects until their situations improve
  - Price premiums will encourage farmers use more environmental practices while fairly compensating them for the extra time and effort required for sustainable coffee
- Coffee farmers should be included in the certification process. Currently, most inspections are conducted by those from industrialized nations who know little about coffee farming.
  - Lessen neo-colonial gap between producers and consumers
  - More involvement by those most affected by these decisions
  - Try to find ways to revise some aspects of certification to make it more attainable and economical for farmers
- More consumer education is necessary
  - Difficult to make consumers aware of implications of different certification
  - So that people can make informed decisions about what they buy
  - So they do not buy coffee that is detrimental to the environment

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