Environment & Society Portal

Multimedia Library Collection: Periodicals

"Seed Care in the Palm Oil Sector"

Chao, Sophie

Chao, Sophie. "Seed Care in the Palm Oil Sector." *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2018): 421-46. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7156816 .

The palm oil sector is widely associated with the destruction of the environment in the pursuit of profit. Drawing from fieldwork in an oil palm concession in Riau, Sumatra, I highlight a heretofore unexplored dimension of the agribusiness nexus—the affective attachments of corporate actors to oil palm seeds. I begin by describing how nursery workers in their everyday practices adopt the role of motherly caregivers to seeds as their cherished "babies." I then explore how scientists conceive experimental breeding as a way of caring for the future of plants and the planet. This loving care contrasts with the violence entailed in seed selection, controlled breeding, and regular culling. Furthermore, tensions arise between breeders and workers on the one hand and corporate "money makers" on the other over seeds as objects of care and sources of value. I demonstrate how seeds reconfigure the relations among human corporate practitioners as they align with or run against each other over matters of care. These internal tensions, however, remain framed by a shared dependence on the well-being of oil palm. Divided as they may be over care, "caregivers" and "money makers" alike ultimately live off the same seed. I highlight that care for seeds enacted by corporate actors troubles the issue of how, and who, we should love, when it comes to a plant whose proliferation produces and depends on the extinction of other species, and which is itself subjected to coercive violence. I argue that the inarguably destructive external effects of the oil palm industry obscure the internal and conflicting affective attachments of corporate actors to seeds. I assess the ethical implications of attending to lively yet lethal capital as it emerges from situated practices of care with corporate assemblages. (Text from author's abstract)

© Sophie Chao 2018. *Environmental Humanities* is available online only and is published under a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0).

Download:

Periodicals Collection, Multimedia Library, Environment & Society Portal
"Seed Care in the Palm Oil Sector"
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/8554
Print date: 11 November 2026 01:45:03

PDF: https://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/key_docs/421chao.pdf

Related links:

- *Environmental Humanities* website
  http://environmentalhumanities.org/
- *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 2
  https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/issue/10/2

Websites linked in this text:

- https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/article/10/2/421/136694/Seed-Care-in-the-Palm-Oil-Sector

Periodicals Collection, Multimedia Library, Environment & Society Portal
"Seed Care in the Palm Oil Sector"
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/8554
Print date: 11 November 2026 01:45:03