

Coffee...The New Green Beans!

BY PETER BRONSKI

When you savor the aroma and taste of a hot cup of your favorite coffee, do you think about the environmental and social stewardship that goes into your drink? With an overwhelming array of choices between hazelnut, French vanilla, mocha-this, cappuccino latte-that, it's easy to forget that whether it's in the office lunchroom, teacher's lounge, or your very own kitchen at home, the coffee you drink has a real, definitive impact on our environment and global society.

For some time a movement has been brewing to make coffee more eco-friendly. In essence—grown, produced, processed, marketed, and ultimately sold with a dedication to environmental and social responsibility. It goes by many names—shade coffee, fair trade coffee, conservation coffee—but no matter what it's called, the coffee at its heart is earth-friendlier than ever before.

Growing support for growing it green

Seldom has a movement united as many diverse and committed stakeholders as the beloved cup o' joe. From Conservation International, the Rainforest Alliance and the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, which recently published "Conservation Principles for Coffee Production," to environmental and social activists,

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as well as big name players like the Seattle Audubon Society, National Wildlife Foundation, the World Bank, and a host of coffee growers and producers associations from Brazil, Columbia, Mexico, the United States and beyond, green coffee has an almost improbable amount of support from nearly anyone even remotely interested in the roasted beans.

Some of the biggest names in coffee have gotten on board with their own unique brands. Green Mountain Coffee Roasters offers its Stewardship line of coffees. Starbucks too offers a host of eco-friendly options, from Conservation Columbian to Shade Grown Mexican. Credit for this shift is due in large part to pressure from environmentally and socially-conscious consumers. For example, after starting with a purchase of just 76,000 pounds of shade grown Mexican coffee in 1996, Starbucks last year purchased more than 1.5 million pounds to meet increased consumer demand.

Making sustainable choices

The idea behind green coffee is not much different from Audubon International's Principles of Sustainable Resource Management, and not surprisingly, the Conservation Principles for Coffee Production (which examine ecosystem and wildlife conservation, soil conservation, water conservation and protection, energy conservation, waste management, pest and disease management, and sustainable livelihoods for farmers), align closely with

focus areas of Audubon International programs. The defining difference between shade or green coffee and more commercialized coffees is the use of agricultural methods that promote habitat protection. Specifically, using coffee plant varieties that grow well in the shade of diverse forest ecosystem canopies that maintain biodiversity and preserve water quality, compared to biologically-sterile monoculture coffees grown in full sun.

It's not just about protecting the South and Central American forests where coffee is grown however, or about assuring a better quality of life for the rural farmers who make their living by the bean—it's about making choices as a consumer that positively impact the environment right where you live and work. Chance's are that some of the birds you see at your feeder each day are migrants that spend their winters in the same habitats that are threatened by deforestation for sun-cropped coffee. In the Pacific Northwest for example, birds like the Hammond's Flycatcher, Swainson's Thrush, Nashville Warbler, American Redstart, Western Tanager, and Bullock's Oriole are Latin American migrants from countries like Mexico, Guatemala, and Nicaragua where they make their winter home among the forests of shade coffee farmers. But eco-friendly coffee is not strictly a New World issue. The expansion of the coffee frontier into Vietnam, other parts of Southeast Asia, and beyond makes it a genuinely global issue.

Fortunately today there are options for the enviro-socially conscious consumer, whether on the supermarket shelves or at the local coffee shop. Armed with the knowledge and savvy to make educated green coffee choices, you can raise your glass proudly confident that the best part of wakin' up is not just coffee in your cup, but also a better environment to boot. ●

