

Anthony Shadid Award

Name and contact information of the nominators and relationship to story

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AP Global Investigative Editor

Names and emails of the reporter or reporting team that produced the report

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Brief description of the story and a link to it online: Few may realize it, but palm oil has quietly become one of the most ubiquitous commodities on the planet, seeping into almost every aspect of our lives. Though found in roughly half the products on supermarket shelves, it's perhaps best known for destroying rainforests and bringing orangutans to the brink of extinction.

But investigative journalists Margie Mason and Robin McDowell, who have spent much of the last two decades reporting on human rights issues from their homes in Southeast Asia, knew there was another, equally devastating story. Millions upon millions of invisible workers were hidden beneath the thick canopy of palm oil trees covering large swaths of Indonesia and Malaysia, which together produce about 85 percent of the world's global \$65 billion supply.

In the most searing, deep-dive look at the laborers who produce palm oil, they exposed an entire industry built on the backs of some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people, including Rohingya Muslims who escaped ethnic cleansing in their homeland. They were first to find women and girls who told graphic stories about being raped in the fields, along with those who complained of constant exposure to toxic agrochemicals and a painful condition known as "fallen womb," resulting from years of heavy lifting.

Illiterate children who had never seen the inside of a school were also documented working up to 12 hours a day. Victims of trafficking and outright slavery were interviewed, including some men who had been held against their will and forced to work for years after being sold onto plantations with help from police.

Mason and McDowell, who have expertise in supply chain tracking, used data from producers, traders and buyers along with US Customs records, to trace palm oil harvested by abused workers to the manufacturers of some of the world's most iconic food and cosmetic brands, including Nestle, Unilever, L'Oreal, Procter & Gamble and even the makers of America's beloved Girl Scout cookies. The reporters also named major Western banks and investment companies that have pumped more than \$12 billion into the booming industry in the last five years, from Bank of America, HSBC and Citigroup to the Vanguard Group and CalPERS, California's massive pension fund.

Their reporting has been meticulous. Of the three dozen companies and financial institutions tied to abuses in the AP stories, not one questioned the findings. Most pointed to their commitments to sustainably produced palm oil and said they relied on

suppliers of the cheap, versatile oil to make sure workers' rights were being respected. But AP found examples of some of the most serious labor abuses occurring at sites that had been certified sustainable by a trusted global organization.

Links to the three main stories:

PALM OIL LABOR ABUSES LINKED TO WORLD'S TOP BRANDS, BANKS Sept. 24, 2020: <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-only-on-ap-indonesia-financial-markets-malaysia-7b634596270cc6aa7578a062a30423bb>

RAPE, ABUSES IN PALM OIL FIELDS LINKED TO TOP BEAUTY BRANDS Nov. 18, 2020: <https://apnews.com/article/palm-oil-abuse-investigation-cosmetics-2a209d60c42bf0e8fcc6f8ea6daa11c7>

CHILD LABOR IN PALM OIL INDUSTRY TIED TO GIRL SCOUT COOKIES Dec. 29, 2020: <https://apnews.com/article/fruits-of-labor-9921800108>

Links to supplemental material:

US Senators demand action after AP exposes palm oil abuses, Sept. 28, 2020: <https://www.ap.org/ap-in-the-news/2020/us-senators-demand-action-after-ap-exposes-palm-oil-abuses>

US says it will block palm oil from large Malaysian producer, Sept. 30, 2020: <https://apnews.com/article/malaysia-archive-asia-e2258c8e29cf5dbc6906d14303614679>

Girl Scouts call on cookie bakers to address child labor, Dec. 30, 2020: <https://apnews.com/article/child-labor-d7d1b95c279e244341e90de0eed5a78e>

US bans second Malaysian palm oil giant over forced labor, Dec., 31, 2020: <https://apnews.com/article/forced-labor-malaysia-261eb108042b23eee596091a40a9a9aa>

VIDEO: Only on AP: Palm oil in cookies tied to child labor, Dec. 29, 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdLQwxRzyb8>

Description of conflicting values encountered in reporting the story: Palm oil is vital to the Malaysian and Indonesian economies, and the governments and producers are quick to push back against criticism. In the past, workers who dared speak out to media or rights groups were tracked down and interrogated, threatened and sometimes deported. Sometimes they were traced via license plates in photos or the clothes they were wearing.

The reporters made many trips to plantations, stretching thousands of miles across Indonesia and Malaysia, interviewing more than 130 current and former workers from eight different countries at more than two dozen companies. Each visit had to be

carefully planned and choreographed. Sometimes the journalists were snuck onto estates, lying down in the back of vehicles with tinted windows, as trusted sources helped navigate passage. Other times, meetings were held with workers outside in secret often at night, at cafes or hotels in the closest towns, which could be hours away from their plantations.

And the reporters knew if the workers were exposed, the backlash could be devastating for their entire families. The journalists, themselves, also had to be careful. They were filmed, photographed and followed by plainclothes police, and a local reporter who attempted to help them was called into the station and interrogated for hours. Police also tracked Mason down at a hotel hours away from where she was reporting to check her passport to determine whether she was breaking any laws.

The reporters also took the unusual step of helping one desperate Indonesian worker who called them scared and hungry after he fled a Malaysian company that had forced him to sleep in the jungle to avoid police. After connecting him with the International Organization for Migration, he was taken to a shelter and classified as a victim of trafficking before eventually arriving home safely. The AP got video and photos of him once he was back in Indonesia, but opted not to use it after a trusted IOM source warned if his identity or home village was identified, he may be targeted by recruiters who work for the Malaysian company he had just fled.

Options considered to resolve the conflicts: Due to its difficulty and sensitivity, the AP investigation took more than two years to complete. And only partial names or nicknames were used to identify workers. Datelines were broadened to regions to make it harder to track workers, and specific plantation names weren't used -- even though it would have strengthened the story. No faces were shown in photos or video, creating visual challenges.

The AP reporters also had to use extra care when dealing with girls and women who had been sexually harassed and raped. The women were often reluctant to speak about a topic that is extremely taboo in the predominantly Muslim countries. Female journalists spoke to them in private, building trust and ensuring them that their faces and names would not be used. The child workers also were carefully handled carefully and no faces were used.

Final decisions and rationales behind them: The AP fully backed an investigative project of this size without using any workers' names, faces or locations. This was extremely rare, but it was something the reporters felt was absolutely essential to ensuring the safety of all sources. The journalists made up for this lack of name specificity by interviewing a large number of current and former workers (more than 130) and more than 100 other sources affiliated with workers i.e. union leaders, activists, academics, government officials, police, clergy, lawyers, etc. Journalists also obtained police reports, legal documents, photos, videos and other documentation of labor abuses whenever possible to corroborate accounts.