

MSc Global Environment, Politics and Society Dissertation

Finding Common Grounds: Blending Certifications and Governments for Strong Biodiversity Governance in Coffee Production

Executive Summary of Findings

Biodiversity loss is a global environmental problem, but there is an opportunity for the University of Edinburgh to help prevent it through the practice of agroforestry in coffee production. This paper theorises that a governance gap of biodiversity in coffee has led to increased biodiversity loss, and that stronger governance through partnerships with certification schemes can help promote biodiversity. It is framed by political ecology and uses stakeholder analysis to examine governance in Rainforest Alliance's and Fairtrade's coffee biodiversity standards. The research question asks: What are the limits and opportunities of certification schemes as a form of biodiversity governance?

In the literature review, I found a general consensus that promoting agroforestry improves biodiversity outcomes, and that certifications can promote biodiversity protection by incentivising shade-growth practices with strong standards. Smallholders are switching to sun-growth production, however, because it produces higher yields and therefore higher profits in the short-term. Rainforest Alliance's biodiversity standards are not strong enough; they can be widely interpreted in different coffee-farming ecologies and farms can technically be certified as shade-growth when there is no longer rainforest around the coffee.

I found through my research that there is a governance gap in both Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade coffee standards, which helps explain how biodiversity protection in certification schemes is failing. Both certifications are limited by power and interest, so neither can reach a point of strong biodiversity governance over the coffee they certify. Mainstream certification schemes, such as Rainforest Alliance, face additional demand pressure from the market and that reduces their power levels overall. The biggest opportunity for certification schemes to govern biodiversity in coffee is to create winning coalitions by working together on concurrent objectives with producing and consuming country governments. Certifications can strengthen shade-growth standards by utilising support from country governments to incorporate local knowledge and contexts as well as social and economic welfare into the standards. This will improve power and interest scores for the certifications as well as governments, and lead to stronger governance in biodiversity over coffee.

There is not one certification that the University can use to assure biodiversity protection in coffee procurement, and until certifications tailor standards to farming ecologies, there will not be one certification that unequivocally protects biodiversity.

However, there are opportunities for the University to promote biodiversity in coffee through procurement, research, and creative problem-solving.

Recommendations for the University of Edinburgh

Based on this research, I recommend the University of Edinburgh source double-certified coffee by Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade. Fairtrade's strong economic initiatives provide smallholders with the financial support to afford practicing agroforestry with a stricter interpretation of Rainforest Alliance's higher shade-growth standards. This will not guarantee biodiversity protection, but it is the best way to promote it when accounting for the biodiversity governance gap in coffee. It will also support SRS's aims to support coffee producers' social and economic livelihoods. Further reading on the benefits of Rainforest Alliance/Fairtrade double certification is available at Dietz et al, p. 84.

Direct trade is a potential option for University procurement because the direct interaction with coffee producers can confirm if they are actually practicing agroforestry more than certifications can, and it is also a way to source based on geography, (areas with vulnerable rainforest that most needs protecting) and supporting farmers to help protect it through agroforestry. The drawbacks to direct trade are that roasters do not have accountability measures to ensure they are delivering on promises, and their promises could change on a whim. It may also be challenging to find directly-traded coffee that supports both environmental and economic initiatives to the same extent that Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade already do.

The University could also request to be involved as a stakeholder in the new standard-setting process while UTZ and Rainforest Alliance are merging, and provide input on opportunities for collaboration. Rainforest Alliance did not list stakeholders that represent both buyers and academia, so the UoE could provide new insight as an actor with both perspectives. Any action the University can take to promote collaboration between producing country governments and certifications on biodiversity policy will help resolve the overall governance gap, and therefore promote biodiversity in coffee, even if it does not directly affect procurement in the immediate future.

This paper reviewed how biodiversity standards in certification schemes are weakening because they are not tailoring biodiversity standards to the regions where coffee is grown. If there is a way for the University of Edinburgh to help create an information base to fill that knowledge gap, whether through research or through partnership with other universities, it could potentially help strengthen the standards. It is important to consider, however, whether certifications would be willing to use that information and tailor the standards. Answering that question is beyond the scope of this research, but it is another essential piece of the puzzle.

Additional research by the University on the ways certifications can best collaborate with governments and policymakers would be advantageous to the field, and it would also be another step towards procuring biodiverse coffee for the institution. This could include types of policy, different forums for collaboration, or what information each could best use from the other.