



“Bird-Friendly” Certification

*Introduction to the existing
“Bird-Friendly” coffee scheme,
and how this might be
implemented with cocoa*

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11th May 2016

BIRD-FRIENDLY COFFEE

INTRODUCTION

“Bird-Friendly” was a certification developed by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center (SMBC) in Washington D.C. to encourage coffee growers to grow their bushes in the shade of forest canopy, as opposed to in direct sun. It is appealing for farmers to grow their coffee in partial-shade or full sun, as ripening takes less time and thus less resources; such coffee is generally associated as well with the use of chemicals to improve outputs as farmers globally have worked to increase their yield in light of economic pressures and high demand for low prices. However, clearing away natural vegetation and forest has serious impacts on the environment and wildlife including birds. SMBC found that in Peru, for example, a sunny plantation has an average of 61 bird species, while in plantations grown in the shade of ten or more tree species, there is over 240 different types of birds.



CRITERIA FOR CERTIFICATION

The requirements for the “Bird-Friendly” label are strict, and as a pre-requisite for consideration by the certifiers, the coffee must be certified USDA Organic (as chemical fertilisers etc. can damage forests, the environment more generally, and thus habitat for birds). Furthermore, there needs to be at least 10 tree species and a canopy height of at least 12 metres. The certifiers recognise that coffee is not necessarily a full-shade plant, and so require only 40% foliage coverage (excluding that produced by coffee plants themselves). For more specific and scientific forest criteria, please see this link: https://nationalzoo.si.edu/scbi/migratorybirds/coffee/quick_reference_guide.cfm

The important point to take from this is that what they are looking for is not necessarily existing bird diversity, but the quality of the potential bird habitat provided in the form of forest canopy at the plantation. While rustic coffee is grown under old or secondary forest, planted shade is also acceptable, but certain trees are required (i.e. indigenous and regenerating species). Their current specifications are geared at South American plantations, so more work would need to be done to determine what requirements and species would be required in a Ugandan/Ghanaian context.

COSTS AND BENEFITS

As with Organic, Fairtrade and other certifications, there are of course extra costs associated with meeting the requirements – firstly, the general costs of using Organic fertilisers, which often need to be used in higher doses to ensure the best results, although it does not always produce the highest yield. Furthermore, if a coop or farmer wants to become certified, they must pay for an inspection by one of the agencies SMBC works with. In 2007, therefore, the conditions of certification were changed from lasting one year, to three, to make this more accessible to growers.

Given the higher costs, the coffee of course must retail at a higher price, which makes marketing very important. One of the appeals of the coffee, aside from the health, ethical and environmental incentives given by the underlying Organic certification, is that because it takes longer to grow in the shade, it is generally thought to have a much richer flavour.

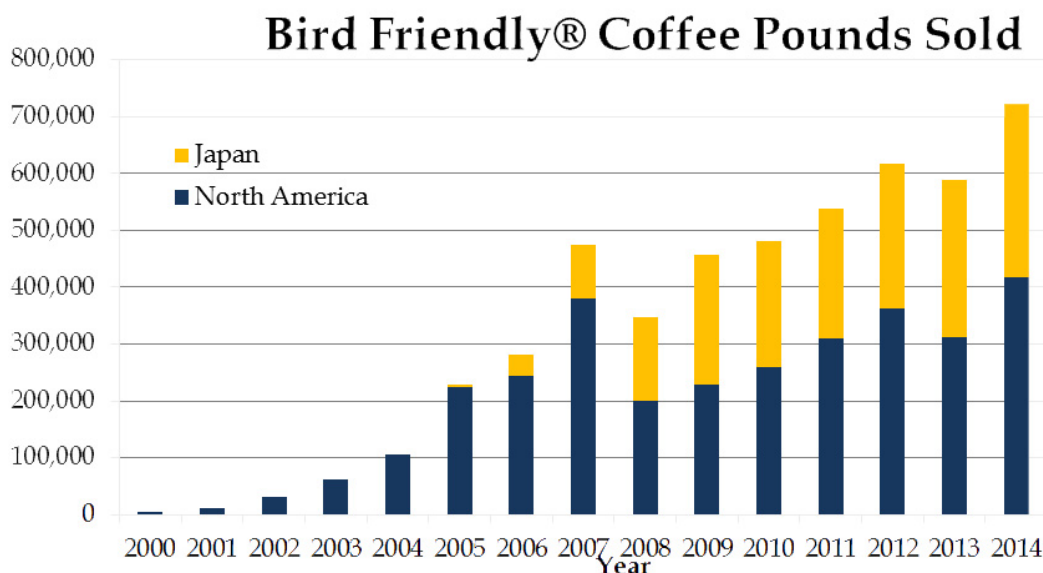
MARKETING CHALLENGES

The “Bird-Friendly” certification has faced several challenges with its marketing and promotion. Firstly, SMBC’s idea for promoting shade-grown coffee as environmentally friendly, beneficial for wildlife and richer in taste, was mimicked by other coffee companies when it was first initiated in 1996. Many specialty coffee thus bears the label “Shade-Grown”, which is unregulated, and tells us little about the conditions under which the coffee is grown, and could be grown under only sparse coverage. This has been an on-going challenge to the “Bird-Friendly” label, which certifies only by strictly managed, scientific criteria.

Another worrying challenge faced by the certifiers, is that retailers (e.g. Starbucks and Whole Foods in the US) often do not advertise their coffee the is actually “Bird-Friendly” certified as “Bird-Friendly”, preferring other labels e.g. Organic, Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance on their packaging. A research scientist at the SMBC (Robert Rice) estimated that only 10% of coffee from “Bird-Friendly” certified farms is actually advertised as such, being sold into the Organic coffee stream. SMBC was working with a consultant in mid-2015 to design plans to increase demand.

One of the key audiences for the coffee are birders. A popular birders site in the US, “All About Birds” (<https://www.allaboutbirds.org>), presents the concerns that many migratory US birds that winter in Latin America are decreasing in population due to deforestation in those countries. Greater exposure is thus needed both in general, but especially in the birder community – more than 46 million Americans claim to be birdwatchers, and half of the population drink coffee. By asking retailers to stock “Bird-Friendly” coffee with the label, the brand would grow and so too would the funds for research by the SMBC (25 cents per pound of coffee goes to the bird centre). Another US retailer “Birds & Beans” (<http://www.birdsandbeans.com>), who sells only “Bird-Friendly” coffee, estimates that if every birder in the US alone drank only “Bird-Friendly” coffee, the market would increase by 1000-fold. Increasing appeal to birders, and encouraging bird-lovers to demand this certification from retailers are thus important steps in improving the growth of the label and the unique environmental benefits it advocates.

Nevertheless, there has been considerable growth in recent years, with growing popularity especially in the North American and Japanese markets specifically. This chart from the SMBC website gives an indication of the growing popularity of the “Bird Friendly” label in coffee sales.



Source: <https://nationalzoo.si.edu/scbi/migratorybirds/blog/?id=1437>

SOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Below is a list of the most useful sites I drew on for this summary so that more information can be sought if required:

- <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/making-sense-of-coffee-labels-shade-grown-organic-fair-trade-bird-friendly/>
- <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/apr/30/caffeology-cultivates-bird-friendly-coffee>
- <https://nationalzoo.si.edu/SCBI/MigratoryBirds/Coffee/faq.cfm>
- <http://nationalzoo.si.edu/scbi/migratorybirds/coffee/>
- <http://www.ethicalcoffee.net/bird.html>
- <http://www.cafeology.com/products/bird-friendly-coffee>

BIRD-FRIENDLY COCOA

Below are some key areas that would need to be investigated if considering producing “Bird-Friendly” Cocoa, and specifically in African locations; for example, near the Semuliki National Park in Uganda.

1. SUN-GROWN VS. SHADE-GROWN COCOA

- Need to understand the way cocoa is typically grown – what conditions are generally preferred commercially and are the most cost efficient? What are the advantages and disadvantages of growing cocoa under different conditions; i.e. like coffee, can it affect the flavour?
- For example, this journal article by Belksey and Siebert (2002) gives a place to begin: http://www.worldagroforestry.org/treesandmarkets/inforesta/documents/agrof_cons_biodiv/Cultivating_cacao.pdf
 - Belksey and Siebert note that traditional cocoa farming, as with coffee, tended to be shaded, thus encouraging biodiversity
 - Other advantages of growing tree crops in the shade are that the crops generally maintain productivity for longer periods of time, are less prone to insect and disease losses, and require less capital and labour inputs
 - So in fact, given the additional agricultural benefits of planting other trees and encouraging diversity, in the long-term the authors suggest farmers may be less affected by fluctuations in market price and unforeseen obstacles
- The SMBC note that, however, small-scale producers of cocoa still tend to use shade-grown methods (<https://nationalzoo.si.edu/scbi/migratorybirds/research/cacao/>)
 - They also mention a potential benefit of shade-grown cocoa is that it actually draws away birds from the crops so they don't do damage!
 - Gives a hopeful indication for transitioning cocoa plantations to being “Bird-Friendly”, which needs to be put in context

2. INCENTIVES FOR FARMERS

- What incentives are going to be put in place for cocoa farmers to comply with the criteria long-term, e.g. financial?
 - If the inspections are only once every three years, while the forests are unlikely to change too much if left to grow, what measures will be put in place to ensure compliance over time?
 - The article referenced above has some ideas for economic benefits, especially long-term, but if a sunny plantation has to replant a forest, it might take some years before reaching the level required to be “Bird-Friendly” – will there be other rewards and incentives provided in the meantime?
- Also need to think about education for the farmers – they need to understand not only the financial incentives, but the environmental incentives and what specifically about adopting bird-friendly practices is most beneficial and why

3. INCENTIVES FOR THE PROCESSERS/RETAILERS

- How will it be ensured that processors and sellers of processed cocoa/chocolate will want to include the “Bird-Friendly” label on their packaging?
 - Need to really show that there is a market for this unique factor (birds) over other specialty chocolates – as such, this suggested area of research is closely linked to the next one (“Incentives for Consumers”)
- Contacting the SMBC (and specifically their scientist Robert Rice, who produced the graph above) could be a useful place to start in terms of research in entering the “Bird-Friendly” market – would be interesting to learn more about their results from working with the consultant last year to promote their label
 - Has there been improvements from only 10% of “Bird-Friendly” coffee actually being labelled as such?
 - Would developing “Bird-Friendly” cocoa complement their current coffee sales?

4. INCENTIVES FOR CONSUMERS

- Need to think about how this cocoa/chocolate is going to be differentiated from others in the specialty chocolate market – as had been the trend with coffee, we don’t want only a small percentage of “Bird-Friendly” cocoa to be labelled as such, as that is the unique factor
- The growing success of “Bird-Friendly” coffee can be drawn on as an incentive for raising funds for the project – one would assume that a similar audience would be drawn to bird-friendly chocolate as coffee; need to figure out how to differentiate the product and give it appeal beyond just the Organic label
 - E.g. note that as opposed to coffee, chocolate is also consumed by children, who might be especially drawn to the idea of helping birds, or drawn to the “Bird-Friendly” label on packaging

5. ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

- Do the existing plantations generally have Organic certification already, and if not, would this be an achievable goal?
 - World Watch Institute notes: “Many farmers seem to have a hard time believing that large-scale organic production is possible, and it is true that the transition to organic can be tough. It usually takes several years to learn the skills of organic growing and to build the system's resistance to pests.... Once the transition is complete, however, organic can make as much sense financially as it does ecologically.” (<http://www.worldwatch.org/node/510>)
 - As with above, it is important to think about the incentive for the farmers for implementing changes that are only likely to pay off in the long-term and may pose short-term challenges

6. CONDITIONS OF EXISTING PLANTATIONS

- Is there a preference for sunny plantations in this area, or more traditional shade-grown? Plantations that are already shade-grown to some extent would be likely to make a much swifter transition to meeting the requisites for being “Bird-Friendly”.
- Should bear in mind the general criteria given by the SMBC when considering this in the local context – i.e. height of coverage, at least 40% foliage etc.; might require expert knowledge to assess the existing conditions appropriately, which could prove expensive

7. CONTEXTUALLY-SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS

- What foliage, tree species and coverage would be appropriate for the geographical setting?
 - As the “Bird-Friendly” criteria have a focus mainly on Latin American growers, some of their requirements will need to be reframed for the African contexts and its different flora/fauna/climate etc.
 - It would be worth getting in touch with the Smithsonian Center or other bird/forest experts to help answer this

8. ROADMAP FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- In light of the existing conditions and contextually-specific requirements, what would be the steps required for implementation of both the Organic and “Bird-Friendly” criteria among small-scale producers in potential locations?
 - There will be differences between the farms, of course, depending on their existing conditions, so what could be very useful in planning significant change, and a cost/benefit analysis, is to draw up a roadmap/estimated timeline to consider how long it would take producers to reach the “Bird-Friendly” stage from a starting point of purely sun-grown/non-Organic, and include all the key stages in-between – with this, a farm could be placed at a point on the timeline, so it is evident how long approximately would be required and what other resources would be needed, and can thus be used to give a clear understanding for all actors involved

9. SPECIES OF BIRDS

- It is worth noting that SMBC has a focus on *migratory* birds – much of the Bird-Friendly coffee sold in the US from Latin American growers, for example, appeals because it helps migratory US bird species that need their southern winter habitats preserved (<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/making-sense-of-coffee-labels-shade-grown-organic-fair-trade-bird-friendly/>)
- Of course this doesn’t apply in the case of foreign markets e.g. Japan, as shown in the graph above! Nevertheless, in the case of Uganda/Ghana, thought needs to be given to the fact that the cocoa would be sold essentially exclusively in foreign markets who may not be as familiar with these bird species (but hopefully just as passionate as they are about their national birds!)
- Research should be done to understand more about the species of birds that could be affected by this initiative and what kinds of habitats they prefer
 - What potential threats are facing birds in the area and does this differ per species?
 - E.g. do they face threats from other wildlife, hunters, disease etc.?

10. BENEFITS TO BIRDS

- As the objective is to be “Bird-Friendly”, we need to think about the birds that could potentially benefit from this – and acknowledge the potential differences depending on geographical location
 - The drive to encourage “Bird-Friendly” farming in Latin American coffee is related to significant deforestation and decreasing bird habitat
 - It seems that the Semuliki National Park, for example, is already a fantastic place for birds to be – it is worth some research and consideration of how much of an impact making the farms in the area “Bird-Friendly” could actually have on the wildlife
 - E.g. how many farms are there, how large, how spread out are they that they might allow bird species to travel and spread out from the national park
 - Again, this might require (expensive) expert input
- Will different species of birds be more likely to benefit than others? What are the implications of this?
- What other species e.g. insects may also benefit or be affected? Are there any negative consequences?