

Article from Coffee & Conservation

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Top 5 Indicators of Sustainable Coffee

Coffee is grown in over 60 tropical countries, with most of it still produced on small family farms, but adding up to tens of millions of acres. Coffee growing supports 25 to 100 million people around the world. In the last decade, a huge worldwide surge in demand for coffee has had two profound consequences. It caused a rapid worldwide expansion in production, largely of cheap beans that flooded the market and contributed to plummeting wholesale prices. And in the rush to increase production, it caused a shift from traditional, sustainable coffee growing methods (with coffee plants grown in the shade of diverse native trees) to intense monocultures that require large inputs of fertilizer and pesticides which bring about a loss in biodiversity and quickly deplete the land.

If choosing sustainable coffee was easy for consumers, there would be no need for a blog like Coffee & Conservation. As I near my 200th post, it seems like a good time to do a bit of a recap, and take a look at the top five indicators of sustainable coffee. Here are the things to look at:

1. Certification. Because of the costs of certification -- to the farmer and/or the roaster -- not all sustainable coffees necessarily carry a seal. And if they do, it could be one of several. Here is a guide:

- If a coffee is certified as Bird-Friendly by the [Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center](#), it is grown under the most stringent environmental standards of any certification system, and it is also required to be certified organic. **If you see this seal, it is one of the best assurances that the coffee was grown with biodiversity and sustainability as top priorities.**
- Organic certification, by the USDA and its accredited agencies, is an important indication that many (but not necessarily all) chemical inputs have been eliminated or reduced. Generally, coffee that is organic is grown under at least some shade cover (which preserves biodiversity).
- [Rainforest Alliance](#) also has environmental criteria, although organic certification is not required, and a coffee may carry the seal and only contain 30% certified beans. Look for coffee that says it is 100% Rainforest Alliance certified, and/or certified organic. Beware that some of the large commodity coffee providers (such as Kraft, which markets [Yuban](#) coffee) use the Rainforest Alliance seal, but only purchase a tiny fraction of their supply from sustainable sources. It's great that they buy some, but their overall business practices do more harm than good, and I cannot endorse their coffees at this time.
- [Utz Kapeh](#) (now Utz Certified) has some environmental standards, but is the least stringent when it comes to biodiversity preservation.



Learn more here at C&C on [shade certification](#), including a link to the pros and cons; [links to the criteria](#) used by SMBC and RA; [organic certification](#), with links to posts describing pesticides that are used on coffee; info on [Utz Certified](#); [biodynamic farming](#); and [who determines](#) that non-certified coffee is shade grown.

2. Country of origin. Some countries still grow much of their coffee under shade, preserving native forest and biodiversity and using few if any chemicals. Other countries have removed shade trees or cut down areas of native forest and planted sun-tolerant coffee varieties. These countries are more likely to grow [shade coffee](#):

- Mexico
- [El Salvador](#)
- [Nicaragua](#)
- Honduras
- Bolivia
- Papua New Guinea
- Ethiopia

These countries are more likely to grow [sun coffee](#), and unless they are Smithsonian Bird-Friendly certified, it's probably best to avoid them:

- [Costa Rica](#)
- Brazil
- Colombia
- Vietnam

3. Botanical variety. There are two species of coffee used commercially: *Coffea arabica* or arabica coffee, and *Coffea canephora*, or robusta coffee. Arabica is high quality. Robusta coffee is nearly always low quality, mass produced in deforested sun coffee monocultures with lots of chemicals, and is used in most supermarket coffees. You won't see "robusta" on the label, so look for "100% arabica."

There are also many different cultivars of arabica coffee. "Bourbon" and "typica" are older types that need at least some shade, so seek those out. "Catuai" and "Caturra" are varieties that are often grown as sun coffee.

Learn more about [botanical varieties](#) of coffee.



4. Roaster. Buy coffee from a small, specialty roaster. A good roaster develops a relationship with the farms and co-ops that grow their coffee -- it's in everybody's best interest for the coffee to be grown sustainably. The farmer gains by having a reliable buyer and a safe, healthy environment, and the roaster gains by having a reliable source of quality coffee. A conscientious roaster will have very specific information on the precise origin of each coffee it sells, and you can determine how the coffee was grown to guide your purchase.

Here is my list of [recommended providers of sustainable coffee](#), and the criteria I used, and an [interactive map](#) of roasters.

5. Price. This is nearly a given: cheap coffee is not sustainable. Not for the farmer, not for the environment. People who are used to paying less than \$5 a pound for grocery store coffee shudder

at the idea of paying \$10 or more for a pound of coffee from a specialty roaster. Ounce for ounce, it's still cheaper than a good bottle of wine or scotch or many other beverages.

The farmers that grow grocery store coffee get less than \$0.25 a pound for it; obviously this is not a living wage. Impoverished farmers are more likely to exploit the environment, convert their coffee to other less ecologically-friendly crops, or abandon their land altogether (contributing to illegal immigration into the U.S. from south of the border). Coffee is often the most important source of income for nations that produce it; if it is no longer profitable, it creates social and economic crises, and impacts governments and democracy.

And trust me when I tell you -- you get what you pay for! A year ago you couldn't have told me that there were so many incredible, distinctly unique coffees out there, an entire world to explore! We've only scratched the surface in our [reviews](#).

Learn more in the [corporate coffee category](#), in particular about the [coffee crisis](#) and why you shouldn't buy coffee from the big commodity coffee providers.

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Coffee drinkers have the potential to make a huge impact on the environment and economies of coffee growing nations. If we understand the stakes, we can make a significant difference, and enjoy our favorite beverage at the same time!

What is sustainable coffee?

"Sustainable coffee is produced on a farm with high biological diversity and low chemical inputs. It conserves resources, protects the environment, produces efficiently, competes commercially, and enhances the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole." - Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, First Sustainable Coffee Congress

The Fine Print

This article originally appeared at Coffee & Conservation, a blog by Julie Craves. Learn more about eco-friendly, sustainable coffee, and how your morning cup can change the world by visiting www.coffeehabitat.com. Are your beans for the birds?

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