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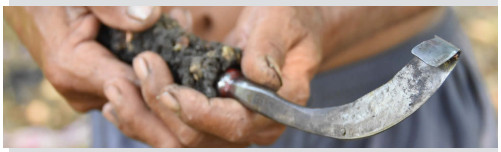
Newsletter of the Fair Rubber Association

rubber news

on tap – angezapft

Stefan Hörmann
Chief Operations Officer

Since June 2021 Stefan Hörmann is Chief Operations Officer of the Fair Rubber Association and thus succeeds Martin Kunz. Stefan holds a master's degree in political and administrative science. He is also deputy director of the environmental foundation Global Nature Fund (GNF). He is in charge of the Bonn office of GNF and is unit head of their programme 'Business and Biodiversity'. He has long-term experience in the collaboration with the private sector, supporting companies in their attempts to establish and improve sustainable supply chains. He gathered international experience e.g. when he was project manager for the global network 'Living Lakes' as well as at work stays in the Middle East and the Caribbean. At Fair Rubber, Stefan is the point of contact for issues concerning members, licensees and those interested in the certification system. The close exchange with Fair Rubber's supplier partners in Thailand, southern India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia is of particular importance to him.



Blowing in the wind:
Dandelions –Rubber of the Future?

Ever so often we get an excited inquiry: Have we heard about rubber being produced from dandelions? Russian dandelions (or, to be more precise: Kazakh dandelions - Taraxacum koksaghyz)? Our answer always is the same: To begin with, this is an old hat. Thomas Edison, a great friend of Henry Ford's, tried out this – and hundreds of other 'latex sap' producing plants almost 100 years ago in an attempt to help the automobile pioneer to become independent of the rubber producers. At the time, production was concentrated mainly in the British Empire (with some in then French occupied Indochina).

The first World War had made it abundantly clear: 'Modern' wars needed wheels (not horses), and having reliable sources of rubber even in times of conflict had become paramount.

In Nazi Germany this quest led to the production of synthetic rubber (as Germany no longer had any colonies). This development is another infamous part of German history: German chemical companies cooperated with the Nazi regime to develop 'Buna' – a project that did lead to synthetic rubber. It cost of the lives of thousands of slave labourers in the Buna site next to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp.

Henry Ford tried to establish a natural rubber plantation in the Amazon – after all: it was from here that the British in 1876 had stolen the 70,000 rubber tree (hevea brasiliensis) seeds for their rubber empire in Malaysia, Ceylon etc.. However, in Ford's model plantation (named: 'Fordlandia') the rubber trees, which do well in the diversity of a rainforest, refused to cooperate. Once planted in a monoculture, the genuine rubber trees were devastated by disease.

Another US venture led to the establishment of rubber plantations in Liberia. Perhaps it was a well meaning effort to provide economic opportunity to 'repatriated' former slaves, but there was definitely US self-interest involved, too. Today, the world's biggest rubber plantation is in Liberia, with (arguably) the world's worst living and working conditions in rubber production.

But back to the dandelion: Seen in light of the above history, the main argument to be made for this 'alternative' rubber seems to be that it is possible to grow this plant in temperate zones: A German tyre company, with funding from the EU and German Government sources has established 'dandelion plantations' and processing in North Germany. And yes, the rubber is fit for

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Where are the dandelions?

Climate Change: It hurts!

It hurts, when one of our longest standing supplier partners loses a key Fair Trade customer – but that's business.

We worked hard set up a contact to a new Fair Trade buyer to help fill the gap.

It really hurt, when, just as that new member (and potentially new buyer) asked the supplier partner for a sample – and the answer was : Sorry, but because of the unseasonal bad weather we cannot tap – it will take a few weeks before we can restart.

Unfortunately, this scenario is increasingly common even for the relatively small number of Fair Trade suppliers: The Climate Crisis and the resulting 'Climate weirding' is hitting growers of natural rubber in multiple ways: Torrential rains and droughts hit tropical and subtropical countries even harder than countries in more temperate regions. Unseasonal droughts result in trees not producing raw latex milk, and to drinking water wells drying up. Unseasonal (heavy) rains make tapping impossible for days and weeks and, and can lead to land slides and floods washing away roads and bridges. Intense tropical cyclones can uproot trees and blow roofs off buildings.

Fair Trade premiums have helped provide more resilient drinking water, replace roofs, … but for it to work – rubber needs to be available for purchase under Fair Trade terms.

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purpose, a tyre has been produced.

A related argument is that rubber plantations are not very flexible when it comes to supply and demand: It takes seven years before the rubber tree can be harvested for the first time. Dandelions are an annual crop, i.e. they could be 'switched on and off' as a source as per requirements. But at what cost – financially and to the environment? The 'Russian Dandelion' contains 10% rubber sap. How much can be produced from a small – compared to a tree - annual plant? And while rubber plantations are monocultures, too, they require little to no chemical input and actually are great absorbers of CO2 because of their dense leaf canopy. Growing dandelions to produce the maximum volume of latex will in all likelihood require a lot of chemical fertilizers – tree roots are just so much more efficient – and there is simply more sun available for the rubber trees to convert abundant tropical sunshine by way of photosynthesis into rubber. 'Raw latex milk' contains on average 30% DRC (Dry Rubber Content) – and the trees can be tapped dozens of times over a year. Furthermore, the huge areas needed to produce enough dandelion-rubber would compete with areas needed for food production. So we wonder: Why this expensive effort to find an expensive alternative, when the 'real thing' is available in abundance? The last 100 years of heavea brasiliensis have been characterized mostly by over-supply and low prices for rubber - often below the cost of production. So why not simply pay a fair price to the producers of the real thing, providing a decent income to the small farmers and tappers – as well as an incentive to look after their rubber trees for the future?

Miracles … may take a bit longer …

The first time we were asked whether we could help source a yoga mat made with Fairly Traded natural rubber was in October 2009 – the Fair Rubber Association did not even exist then. The request was to help establish a supply chain for a yoga mat containing some natural rubber, but the challenge was to have a mat that does not contain ANY synthetic rubber. And that is the real issue: There a quite a number of yoga mats on the market, which claim that their mats are made with natural rubber – but they don't disclose that they also contain synthetic rubber, i.e. plastic, i.e. fossil fuel: Only rubber experts can smell/test that difference. But finally, after 'only' 12 years of trying, after numerous visits to potential mat makers in a number of countries – a double miracle has happened: Two of our members now offer yoga mats …

… with natural rubber only!

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