

Coffee That Eases The Conscience

By David Barton Bray

ONCE there was Maxwell House and Folger's. Now there's Costa Rica and Terrazus and Sumatran Mandhelings, with attributes as baffling to the average consumer as those of wines. "Full body, very rich, with an array of grace notes modulating from nut and smoke tones through hints of wine in the finish," as one Guatemalan brew was described in the trade magazine *Coffee Journal*.

And now gourmet coffee has been invaded by social, political and environmental themes, with terms like "organic," "fair trade," "bird-friendly," "shade tree" and the catch-all "sustainable" filtering into coffee bars. Following the example of dolphin-safe tuna and child-labor-free clothing, coffee has become the next frontier of conscientious consumerism.

In this case, consumers are girded by a genuine breakthrough: the discovery (or, rather, rediscovery) that traditional small coffee farms, with tall natural canopies that shade an understory of coffee bushes, replicate the structure of the natural forest. For migratory birds and other manifestations of biodiversity, this replication serves about as well as the real thing.

As early as 1932, Ludlow Griscom of the American Museum of Natural History noted that the density and diversity of bird populations in traditional coffee farms varied little from virgin forest — an observation whose significance was little noted until recent research by Dr. Ivette Perfecto at the University of Michigan and others confirmed and expanded on this finding. As the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center has pointed out, migratory-bird censuses over the past several decades are showing alarming declines, with the number of birds crossing the Gulf of Mexico each year having decreased by half in the past 20 years.

Part of this decline is due to the production of "sun coffee" — a modern, capital-intensive, high-yielding, hybrid crop that creates a biological desert. Driven in part by American foreign assistance, sun coffee de-

stroyed vast coffee forests and their embedded biodiversity in the 1970's and 80's. As Robert Rice of the Smithsonian and Justin Ward of the Natural Resources Defense Council have reported, of the 6.9 million acres of coffee planted in northern Latin America, about 40 percent has been converted to sun coffee.

There's more at stake than birds. Small coffee farmers are also an endangered population. In Mexico, the world's leading producer of organic coffee, most small farmers are indigenous people who make less

Buying exotic beans really can help the planet.

than \$1,000 a year. Their sense of desperation is reflected in the fact that so many of the Zapatista rebels in southern Mexico were organic-coffee farmers. Those farmers who have chosen organic coffee over arms have faced afflictions of biblical proportions.

The Mexican forest fires that burned eyes in the southern United States last spring also destroyed thousands of acres of coffee bushes. After that, intense rain, one-quarter of the average rainfall for the year, fell in five days in Chiapas, killing hundreds of people, leaving 15,000 homeless and destroying 240,000 acres of coffee.

But for those shade-tree coffee farmers who have been able to survive armed uprisings, fires and floods, the new market for chichi coffee has presented a productive alternative for those with few options. In the first years of their transition to organic shade-tree coffee, the farmers of one coffee cooperative earned as much as 43 percent more than their nonorganic neighbors, although the price difference has tended to moderate over time.

Beyond political correctness, buying organic, shade-tree, bird-friendly coffee is an everyday act of mindful consumerism that can actually make a difference for both biodiversity and poor peasant farmers — providing an array of grace notes in the international economy. □

David Barton Bray is chairman of the environmental studies department at Florida International University.