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A monkey on the back of Davos

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*There have been two headlines in the news recently that should be viewed and analysed together. The first of these is the **prediction that there will be a virtual extinction of nonhuman primates in 25 to 50 years**. The second is the fear of an “end to globalization” **expressed in Davos** by various free trade supporters, the warning signs of which are Donald Trump’s protectionist intentions and the prospect of re-establishing obstacles to free trade between the United Kingdom and Europe. What is the connection between these two signals? It is in the nature and evolution of globalization.* The proportion of globalized trade in world production is now about the same as at **the beginning of the 20th century**. But the international trade of the 1900s was mainly composed of manufactured goods, mostly exchanged between the economies of the North, with Southern economies remaining largely isolated. Today, world trade is largely an exchange of intermediate products, between all the economies of the world, including the South, of which agricultural and forestry products form a significant part.

Accelerated degradation of tropical forests

However, the accelerated degradation of tropical forests, one of the reservoirs of biodiversity and the most common habitat for primates, is linked to these commodities. For example, one third of rainforest destruction, the habitat where most of our primate cousins live, is [linked to only four commodities](#): beef, soy, palm oil and wood. Thus, industrial cattle farming in the North as well as in the South encourages people to cut down trees or clear savannah to grow soy for livestock feed, and this is also the case with [many other commodities](#) such as coffee, cocoa and rubber, when produced without serious environmental precautions. And these commodities derive precisely from those countries in which the largest populations of primates are threatened: Brazil, Madagascar, Indonesia, Malaysia and Gabon, which export to Northern countries as well as to those of the South.

“End of globalization” ?

Hence, should it be hoped that primates and their forests might be saved by the “end of globalization”, an end that sends a shiver down the spines of Davos seminar participants, but that [has been announced by analysts](#) and wished for by certain political programmes? This is unlikely. The possible protectionist wave that some envisage will not significantly reduce the dependence of all economies on imported agri-food commodities. For example, substituting European oil for imported palm oil would entail, in addition to an increase in prices, an explosion of agricultural areas devoted to its production in Europe, which would then necessitate the importation of the crops that would have been grown on these lands. Moreover, it would be somewhat difficult for Europe to produce its own coffee, cocoa and rubber. Finally, it would be necessary for the countries of the South themselves to close their borders to imports from their neighbours, since Asia accounts for most of the palm oil outlets.

Restricting demand by consuming less ?

In addition to de-globalization, some proposals go further and are also linked, in a complementary way, to profound lifestyle changes: surely we can consume less industrially-reared beef, choose short circuits and grass-fed livestock farming, and thus restrict the demand for soy and industrial beef, whether imported or produced at home. The problem then would be the speed and magnitude of the necessary change: globally, we cannot expect a sufficiently large and rapid reduction in world food demand, when it is currently growing, within the announced 25 to 50 year timeframe over which the disappearance of primates will take place, particularly due to the growth of emerging countries.

Truly sustainable production of commodities

What could save primates and forests therefore lies in the truly sustainable production of these commodities. It is possible to produce beef without clearing the Amazon, palm oil without threatening the orangutan, coffee without encroaching on forests, while offering decent incomes to producers, and especially to farmers. But this requires that brands commit, that companies trace their supplies, that public policies assist them to do so, that consumers are attentive to the commitments of companies, and finally that everyone along the value chain is ready to pay the real price of sustainable production. It should be noted that this price differential is generally not very high. Producing without deforestation is a little more difficult, but it is possible by converting agricultural land, regenerating existing

plantations, modifying rotations and production techniques, and replacing certain productions with others. Consuming sustainable coffee or palm oil is just a little more expensive. On the other hand, environmental labels are today providing solutions that are still too limited to the needs of protection. What consumers and primates need is value chains with companies that make firm commitments to “zero deforestation”, public policies that support them, NGOs and researchers who monitor these policies and consumers with an awareness.

Is it really necessary to persuade people of the economic importance of primates to bring about policy changes and to encourage care and consideration regarding the products we put in our shopping baskets?

We have seen scientists and journalists talking about the sinister prediction of the disappearance of primates, promoting the importance of this subject by raising the issue of the usefulness of primates for the ecosystem and our economies. We could also question whether we really need to consume industrially farmed beef or unsustainable palm oil. Surely the protection of the planet of the apes is worth making an effort, which isn't even particularly demanding, to produce and consume with an awareness that is sensitive to the environmental consequences? Is it really necessary to persuade people of the economic importance of primates to bring about policy changes and to encourage care and consideration regarding the products we put in our shopping baskets? Such awareness would be a good way to revive consciousness of the content and impacts of these well-known international trade flows, which political projects today seem to condemn very easily, having once praised them for years.

Of course, the changes to be made are not easy and they also concern our own production systems and the biodiversity of our territories. Let us remember the difficulties encountered in the conservation of wild species in Europe; we have thus recently eradicated the Pyrenean bear, which was also a victim of its difficult coexistence with livestock farming, forestry and hunting...
