



ON SHADE-GROWN COFFEE

Q.

My friends and I have decided to only buy shade-grown coffee to help protect habitat. I was saddened to learn that Intelligentsia doesn't offer it. Do you plan to offer shade-grown coffee?

A.

Michaei, March 28, 2007

The majority of our Direct Trade coffees are grown under shade, but there can be quite a difference between the types of shade and the role the shade trees play in the surrounding ecosystem. The most common definition for Shade-Grown is: "Coffee grown under a canopy of partial to fully shaded forest." However, shade can be like snowflakes in that it varies qualitatively and quantitatively from farm to farm. It gets even more confusing when one considers that shade-grown coffee is being promoted by many different organizations simultaneously, each with a slightly different objective. Many coffee companies and farms currently market coffee as "shade-grown" in the absence of any declared standard or certification. So how to figure out what's best as a consumer?

One reality is that there are current patterns that exist based on country, farm size, and history. For example, it is extremely rare to find a large-volume coffee farm with shade over their trees while smaller farms tend towards more forest. Small farmers in Mexico and Peru tend to grow coffee under lots of shade, whereas Kenyan and Rwandan farmers tend to have much less shade, regardless of how big their farms are. These African countries have been deforested for decades as a result of extreme poverty, exponential population growth, and exploitation by colonial powers. There is a lot more land per capita in much of the Americas than in Africa, and it stands to reason that there are more trees.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember about shade as it relates to DT is that our model is all about pursuing maximum sustainability for the coffee farmer. This means we cannot simply isolate one specific component of sustainability to a lead position at the expense of others. A coffee farm with lots of shade that loses money every year and pays the workers below minimum wage is not sustainable. A farm that pays the workers well, has shade, and earns lots of profit but has no filtration for the water waste and ends up contaminating the river does not fit the bill. And a farm with great shade but no certificate is no less environmentally friendly for lack of official credentials; it's just that the farmer has decided that the money she would spend to become certified is better used in other ways. To really work and be viable for the future, a farm must be sustainable socially, environmentally, and economically. If one of these fails, the rest will eventually fail too.

**For even more information:
www.directtradecoffee.com**

This is why we believe it is extremely important to avoid dogma and consider the full picture holistically when thinking about any one of these issues. A consumer might fixate on shade and decide never to buy Rwandan coffee since there is very little shade there. How do you think a Rwandan farmer might feel about that? The whole country is deforested and has been for generations. Nearly every inch of arable land is being put into service to try to feed the people in what is one of the most densely populated and impoverished countries in all of Africa. Just over ten years removed from a horrifying genocide, the country is rebuilding and trying to position itself to move forward and an impressive amount of international donor money has poured into the country to help build infrastructure and revitalize the coffee sector. Is it right of us to tell these farmers we will not support their efforts because they don't have shade, when it is far beyond their means and the most pressing concern is basic survival?

None of what I've said is an argument against shade in coffee. Fact is, most of our DT coffees are grown under considerable shade. I am one of the biggest believers in the benefit of shade on coffee farms: for the earth, for the birds and animals depend on the habitat, and for the coffee quality itself. Shade is undeniably good, and our buying practices support continuing development of more shade on the farms we work with. All that I hoped to demonstrate is that "is there shade?" is not a yes or no question, that certification is not a true necessity, and that marketing claims using shade as a lead subject should not always be taken at face value by the conscientious consumer. Rather, I would encourage the consumer to look for details, exercise the power of Google to get a comprehensive picture, and then choose to support products and companies which can demonstrate their commitments to sustainability in coffee (or any other product) by their actions.

**REMEMBER, IF YOU OR YOUR CUSTOMERS HAVE QUESTIONS
FOR INTELLIGENTSIA'S COFFEE BUYER, GEOFF WATTS, PLEASE SEND
THEM TO:**

ASKGEOFF@DIRECTTRADECOFFEE.COM

