

## Rainforest Alliance unmasked



*Simon Birch explores the most recent allegations of failures at the US-based ethical certification scheme.*

There's been a storm brewing – and it's not just been in a teacup.

This particular tempest has been centred on the tea plantations of Assam, in the remote north-east corner of India, which help to make the country the world's second biggest tea producer.

A recent BBC investigation has uncovered an appalling catalogue of “dangerous and degrading living and working conditions”. Many tea plantation workers were found to live in sub-standard housing giving them little protection from Assam's notoriously high rainfall. Sanitation was found to be often non-existent resulting in families being forced to defecate among the tea bushes themselves. And wage levels were so low that tea workers and their families were left malnourished leaving them vulnerable to fatal illnesses.

Not good.

But perhaps the most shocking aspect of the investigation is that these tea plantations, which supply some of the UK's biggest tea brands including PG Tips, Tetley and Twinings, are certified by the Rainforest Alliance. This is the US-based ethical certification organisation whose logo of a little green frog is now increasingly popping up on everything from packets of tea to pineapples.

### Wider responses

Green Tourism, the world's largest green independent environmental accreditation body for the hospitality industry, has withdrawn its support for Rainforest Alliance products in the wake of the BBC report. Jon Proctor, Chief Executive for Green Tourism, said: “We have decided to withdraw our recommendation and credit provided to hoteliers and tourism operators using Rainforest

Alliance certified products until they can demonstrate significant improvements to their audit systems.”

Similarly Yorkshire Tea, which is supplied by the tea plantations named in the BBC report, expressed shock at the findings: “It was deeply concerning to hear the reports recently broadcast from the BBC,” said a spokesperson for Yorkshire Tea. “A full investigation is now under way and we are in contact with suppliers, certification partners and others to understand more.”

### Misleading consumers?

So what's going on here and are shoppers just being conned into buying what they thought was ethical tea?

“We fully accept there have been weaknesses in Assam and there is still a lot of work for us to do,” says Christina Cullen from the Rainforest Alliance. “We strongly believe that certification and the training that goes with it does result in long-term change and improvement for the workers and their families in Assam through sustained engagement.”

But hang on, doesn't the Rainforest Alliance logo guarantee some minimum ethical standards right now rather than in the long-term? “We have never said the Rainforest Alliance seal is a guarantee,” replies Cullen. “It is a mark that shows work is being done to improve the lives of the environment, workers and farmers around the world.”

Interestingly this is what the Rainforest Alliance's website says: “Rainforest Alliance Certified farms and forests are managed according to rigorous environmental, social and economic criteria.” Now to my mind this would imply that Rainforest Alliance certified products do indeed guarantee some

minimum ethical standards. Confusing or what?

### A wider pattern?

Of course this isn't the first time that there's been criticism of Rainforest Alliance tea estates. In Ethical Consumer's recent product guide to tea we reported on allegations of labour rights violations in Rainforest Alliance-certified tea plantations in Kenya. Plus there are long-standing criticisms of the whole Rainforest Alliance process, a key one being that unlike Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance doesn't offer a minimum guaranteed price to producers.

So where does this leave the shopper who just wants to ensure that their brew isn't ripping off some tea worker on the other side of the world? Whilst Rainforest Alliance clearly isn't perfect it has to be said that it does appear to be working for the interests of both workers and the environment and has been crucial in driving the growth of ethically labelled tea which now accounts for almost 90% of the UK market.

To be sure, though, that your cuppa isn't an ethical cop-out, it's worth noting that tea plantations are required to meet core International Labour Organisation rights as a condition of Fairtrade certification. This includes guarantees around minimum wages and child labour. Reykia Fick from Fairtrade International, the body that sets global Fairtrade standards reassures tea drinkers everywhere by saying that: “The whole purpose of Fairtrade certification in a plantation setting is around protecting and benefitting workers.”

Time to put a Fairtrade brew on then, don't you think?