Diversified global vegetable oil production can mitigate

climate change and achieve socio-environmental co-benefits

Siyan Zeng[1,2,3*], Fu Chen[4], Chengcheng Zhang[1], Shenggen Fan[5], Baojing Gu[3,6],

Erik Meijaard[7], Kyle Frankel Davis[8,9], Thomas Cherico Wanger [1,2*]

[1] Sustainable Agricultural Systems & Engineering Laboratory, School of

Engineering, Westlake University, Hangzhou, China.

[2] Key Laboratory of Coastal Environment and Resources of Zhejiang Province,

Westlake University, Hangzhou, China.

[3] College of Environmental and Resource Sciences, Zhejiang University,

310000, Hangzhou, China

[4] School of Public Administration, Hohai University, 211100, Nanjing, China

[5] Academy of Global Food Economics and Policy, China Agricultural

University, Beijing, China

[6] Zhejiang Provincial Key Laboratory of Agricultural Resources and

Environment, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China

[7] Borneo Futures, Jalan Sultan, Bandar Seri Begawan, BS8111, Brunei

[8] Department of Geography and Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware,

Newark, DE, United States

[9] Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, University of Delaware, Newark, DE,
United States

*Corresponding authors: zengsiyan@westlake.edu.cn (SZ);

tomcwanger@gmail.com (TCW)

Global vegetable oil production is a crucial ingredient for food and household

products but also a major source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and

other environmental externalities. A diversified supply may improve the

sustainability and resilience of profitable vegetable oil production globally.

Here, we provide the first spatial assessment of the environmental and

economic effects of the globally dominant vegetable oil crops soybean, oil

palm, rapeseed, sunflower, groundnut, and olive globally, based on new data

from a meta-analysis, life cycle assessment, and process-based crop growth

modelling. We show that the total annual GHG emissions, water use, land use,

pesticide use, and farmer income of the six vegetable oil crops are 1.2

Gt CO_2eq/year, 876.0 km^3/year, 168.3 Mha/year, 953.6 kt/year, and 66.5 billion

USD/year, respectively. We also found that diversified vegetable oil

production, for instance, through increased fractions of a highly productive oil

tree crop *Camellia oleifera* can reduce GHG emissions, water use, land use,

and pesticide use by 14.0%, 4.9%, 7.3%, 9.3%, respectively and increase

farmer income by 82.6%. When considering enabling conditions for

technology and policy support in a technology-policy-enabling scenario, these

benefits increase 1.3, 2.1, 1.8, 1.7, and 3.2 folds, respectively. Our results

provide practical guidance on where and how diversified oil crop production

can advance a sustainable food system transformation and help to mitigate

climate change.

The global food system faces the dual challenge of meeting the demands

for food, fiber, and energy from a growing population while addressing

exacerbating environmental issues (1). More than 30% of the total agricultural

land is currently used for vegetable oil crop production, 80% of which is

occupied by the six major oil crops soybean (*Glycine max*), oil palm (*Elaeis*

guinensis), rapeseed (*Brassica napus*), groundnut (*Arachis hypogaea*),

sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*), and olive (*Olea europaea*) (2). These oils are

used in a variety of products including cooking oil, cosmetics, and biofuel

production - with steadily increasing global demand (3). However, production

supplies are strongly impacted by geopolitical tensions and climate change,

both of which affect global trade and prices (4). Moreover, vegetable oil

production is a major driver of cropland expansion, associated with up to 1.9

$GtCO_2$ - eq (23%) of global food carbon emissions (5) and heavily relying on

pesticides and fertilizers, which exert pressure on soil and water resources

(6,7). Palm oil and soybean oil, two of the most widely-used oil crops for daily

commodities, have been linked with biodiversity decline, deforestation, and

regionally variable effects on human livelihoods (6,8,9). Geographically, these

impacts are most prevalent in the Southeast Asian tropics for palm oil and

South America for soybean oil (10,11,12). Previous studies have quantified

aspects of these effects across spatial scales, showing that there is a large

potential to diversify global vegetable oil production (13) and optimize crop

distribution to better meet future demand (14). Despite decades of research

efforts, a spatially explicit synthesis of environmental and economic effects of

the major vegetable oil crops globally is currently missing (15,16).

Furthermore, an analysis of where and how diversified oil crop production

could mitigate climate change impacts and achieve socio-environmental co-

benefits is lacking.

Efforts to mitigate environmental impacts while maintaining or even

increasing vegetable oil yields have focused on improving supply chain

transparency through effective policy (e.g. the EU deforestation free supply

chain law including oil palm and soybean; 17,18), enhancing farmer income

through sustainability standards (19), and various agricultural diversification

practices (e.g., crop rotations or agroforestry; 20). Diversified supply of

vegetable oil ideally contributes to a triple win-win-win solution whereby the

outcomes are healthier oils with a lower environmental footprint and higher

revenue (21). Identifying such new opportunities usually requires breeding or

gene editing existing crops for preferable traits (22), improved management

for instance through agroforestry (23,24), exploring alternative exotic oils such

as microbial single-cell oils (25,26) or bioprospecting new species (27).

Woody oil crops are potential candidates that may be able to combine high

yields with high nutritional value and high environmental benefits. *Camellia*

oleifera (hereafter Camellia) is currently cultivated almost exclusively in Asia,

including China, Japan, and Vietnam (28) but it may provide such a triple win

solution (23,28). Camellia yield potential of 2.8 t/ha is the second highest just

after oil palm (29,30), the oil is of high nutritional value on monounsaturated

fatty acid, squalene, and vitamin E (see Table S1) (28,31,32), and the tree

crop has been shown to protect farmer livelihoods, prevent soil erosion, and

increase biodiversity through agroforestry or intercropping (27,33,34,35). As a

generalist species, Camellia also has low habitat requirements (28,33) and,

hence, allows for cultivation on degraded land and in regions, where arable

land is scarce. However, limited accessible data on Camellia's environmental

and social parameters (36) has prevented an integrated assessment of the

potential environmental and social effects of its inclusion in diversified

vegetable oil production mixes (6,15).

Here, we first provide a quantitative global and spatially explicit

assessment of GHG emissions, water use, land use, fertilizer use, and farmer

income for six major vegetable oil crops. We do this based on a meta-analysis,

life cycle assessments, and process-based crop growth modelling with

spatially interpolated yields for six major oil crops soybean, oil palm, rapeseed,

sunflower, groundnut, and olive. We then identify socio-environmental co-

benefits between current oil crop distributions and a potential replacement oil

crop, for instance Camellia that can be used without yield loss but with

increased farmer income (see Fig. S1). Our results enable decision makers to

optimize global vegetable oil crop distribution for the least environmental

impact but the greatest benefits without land expansion and oil yield loss

based on new spatially explicit data. We provide a novel approach to evaluate

opportunities for partial crop substitution achieving socio-environmental co-

benefits.

Results

Environmental impact of vegetable oil crops

We conducted a global meta-analysis (16) based on 837 unique records

in 285 studies to parameterize a life cycle assessment and then mapped the

environmental impacts of groundnut, soybean, oil palm, sunflower, rapeseed,

and olive (for details see Methods Section and Extended Section 1.2.3). In

2015, all vegetable oil crops in our study accounted for 298.3 Mha of

harvested areas, equivalent to 21.4% of global total harvested areas, of which

40.5% was occupied by soybean, 11.6% by rapeseed, 8.9% by groundnut,

8.2% by sunflower, 7.6% by oil palm, and 3.4% by olive (2).

We estimate that the total annual GHG emissions of the six vegetable oil

crops are 1.2 Gt CO_2eq/year, with 44.5%, 34.9%, 8.9%, 6.1%, 4.3%, and 1.3%

coming from soybean, oil palm, groundnut, rapeseed, sunflower, and olive oil,

respectively (Fig.1a and Fig. S14). The total global emissions from soybean

are 547.1 Mt CO_2eq/year, mainly originating in South America (466.4 Mt

CO_2eq/year) and North America (45.5 Mt CO_2eq/year). At a country level,

soybean production in Brazil generated the highest GHG emissions of 59.2%,

followed by Argentina, the Republic of Paraguay, and the United States. For oil

palm, the total amount is 429.2 Mt CO_2eq/year and mainly emitted in Asia and

Oceania (360.2 Mt CO_2eq/year) and Africa (48.5 Mt CO_2eq/year). The highest

total annual GHG emissions of palm oil at country level come from Indonesia

(64.4%), the world's largest palm oil producer, followed by Malaysia (17.9%),

and Nigeria (9.2%). These emissions likely come from N_2O, and CO_2 through

fertilizer application and land use change from forest biomass or burning

organic soil (see Methods). The GHG emission intensity (i.e., amount of GHG

emitted per 1 liter oil) is highest in palm oil (9.7 kg CO_2 eq/L) due mainly to

deforestation, followed by olive oil, groundnut oil, soybean oil, rapeseed oil,

and sunflower oil (Fig. S16). For more details on all oil crops see Fig. S15 and

Fig. S33.

The total annual water use (i.e., the aggregation of green, blue, and grey

water use; see Methods for details) is 876.0 km^3/year, with the descending

order of soybean (364.2 km^3/year), followed by oil palm (160.8 km^3/year),

rapeseed (145.7 km^3/year), groundnut (109.9 km^3/year), sunflower (65.2

km^3/year), and olive (30.1 km^3/year) (Fig. S15b and Fig. S14). Water use in

Asia and Oceania is highest at 360.0 km^3/year, followed by South America,

North America, Africa, and Europe. The water-use intensity for producing 1-

liter oil also varied across regions (Fig. S19), which is affected by the length of

the crop growing period (especially for tree crops like oil palm and olive),

evapotranspiration, crop-specific factors, and climate variables. The mean

water-use intensity was highest for olive oil (14.5 m^3/L) and soybean oil (13.9

m^3/L) followed by groundnut oil, rapeseed oil, sunflower oil, and palm oil (Fig.

S19).

The total annual land use of all six vegetable oil crops is 168.3 Mha/year

when taking multi-cropping, inter-cropping, or fallow into account (see

Methods). Total land use is highest for soybean with 79.1 Mha/year) and

lowest for sunflower with 10.2 Mha/year (Fig. S14). Regionally, land use is

highest in Asia and Oceania (59.7 Mha/year) and South America (36.9

Mha/year) followed by North America, Africa, and Europe (Fig.1c). The

regional variation in land-use intensity per liter oil was low in rapeseed and

sunflower but relatively high for palm, groundnut, soybean and olive (Fig.

S20). The mean value of land-use intensity differs for producing 1-liter

vegetable oil among crops, ranging from 8.4 m^2 for sunflower to 51.6 m^2 for

olive, respectively.

The total annual pesticide use of the six vegetable oil crops is 953.6

kt/year, with the majority being used in Asia and Oceania (37.1%) and South

America (30.2%) (Fig.1d). Pesticide use in South America from soybean

production is 274.8 kt/year, which accounts for 60.9% of total pesticide use for

soybean production globally and is higher than the total amount used for all

other vegetable oil crops (Fig. S21).

We found the total farmer income from the six vegetable oil crops to be

66.5 billion USD/year, with the majority being earned in Asia and Oceania

(31.9%) and South America (23.7%) (Fig.1e). The farmer income differs

between regions and is highest in Asia and Oceania for groundnut (7.3 billion

USD/year), palm (5.2 billion USD/year), and rapeseed (3.8 billion USD/year),

followed by South America for soybean (13.9 billion USD/year) and then

Europe for both sunflower (5.5 billion USD/year) and olive (2.6 billion

USD/year). For all details see Fig. S22.

Crop replacement to mediate socioenvironmental effects of oil production

We use *Camellia oleifera* as a potential replacement oil crop case study

that can reduce environmental impacts and enhance socioeconomic benefits

of global vegetable oil production. Through land suitability mapping

(Methods), we find that 52.2 Mha within the current vegetable oil production

areas are suitable for Camellia production without land expansion for

vegetable oil crop cultivation (Fig. S11b and Table S16). Brazil is the major

soybean oil producer and could replace almost one quarter (24.4%) of its

vegetable oil crop planting areas with Camellia. With a cumulative potential of

over 50%, Argentina, the United States, Indonesia, and India could replace

19.8%, 11.1%, 8.4%, and 5.4% within the current vegetable oil production

areas, respectively. China is the biggest producer and consumer of Camellia

oil globally with the potential of 4.9% of Camellia planting in the current

vegetable oil crop planting areas (Fig. S12).

Using yield modelling for Camellia cultivation, we predict a mean potential

yield of 14.4 t/ha and the highest yield to be 32.0 t/ha for fresh fruit (Fig.

S13d), which can be used to produce 2.1 t/ha and 4.6 t/ha Camellia oil (Fig.

S5). Advanced biotechnology and management techniques such as genome

editing for seed oil domestication and sprout anvil grafting technology could

increase Camellia oil yields up to 22.5 t/ha with a further 7-10 times increase

in the future (27,28,29). We therefore use three spatially explicit yield

scenarios to simulate the environmental impacts of Camellia oil in a life cycle

assessment: a conservative scenario (or 50% of potential yield, S1), strategic

improvement scenario (or 75% of potential yield, S2), and a technology-policy-

enabling scenario (or 100% of potential yield, S3) (Methods).

Camellia oil produces substantially lower GHG emission than most

current oil crops, with 4.4 $kgCO_2$ eq/L, 3.0 $kgCO_2$ eq/L, and 2.3 $kgCO_2$ eq/L in

S1, S2 and S3, respectively. compared to the six main vegetable oil crops (3.5

$kgCO_2$ eq/L for sunflower oil; 4.0 $kgCO_2$ eq/L for rapeseed oil; 8.4 $kgCO_2$ eq/L

for groundnut oil and soybean oil, 8.5 $kgCO_2$ eq/L for olive oil; 9.7 $kgCO_2$ eq/L

for palm oil; Fig. S16). Specially, Camellia oil is still advantageous in the yield

scenario S2 and S3 above, if high GHG emission from land use change (the

above and below-ground C stock change, forest burning, and organic soil

burning) for soybean oil and palm oil are excluded (4.4 $kgCO_2$ eq/L; 2.7 $kgCO_2$

eq/L) (Fig. S17 and Fig. S18). Camellia oil also requires much less water (9.7

m^3/L) starting from Scenario 2 than soybean oil (13.9 m^3/L) and olive oil (14.5

m^3/L) and compared to all vegetable oil crops in Scenario 3 (Fig. S19 and Fig.

S24b). Land use of Camellia oil for all three scenarios (6.3, 4.2, and 3.1 m^2/L

for S1, S2, and S3, respectively; Fig. S25) is much lower than all other

vegetable oils (7.9 m^2/L, 8.4 m^2/L, 9.2 m^2/L, 10.4 m^2/L, and 18.6 m^2/L for

groundnut, sunflower, soybean, rapeseed, and olive oil, respectively; Fig. S20)

except for palm oil (2.9 m^2/L).

Camellia crop replacement without land expansion and yield loss

For tangible solutions, we consider only solutions without land expansion

and where overall vegetable oil yields (i.e., the total yield produced by any

combination of vegetable oil planted) per area are maintained. We firstly

focused on replacing global vegetable oil crop production area with Camellia

by simultaneously optimizing all five objectives across all six vegetable oil

crops (i.e., reducing GHG emissions, water use, land use, and pesticide use

per liter oil, and increasing farmer income per hectare land). Optimization for

all five objectives leads to the lowest area replacement with 26.3 Mha (11.2%),

37.1 Mha (15.8%), and 42.0 Mha (17.9%), corresponding to Camellia yield

scenarios 1 to 3, respectively (Fig. 3). Regarding spatial patterns of

replacement, the main benefits for Camellia replacement in Africa are for

groundnut, oil palm, and sunflower, in South America for soybean, in Asia and

Oceania for rapeseed, and in Europe for olive (Fig. 2). Southern Brazil,

Argentina, Paraguay, southern Nigeria, and Tanzania, central India, and

southern China were among the top-ranked 10% areas for reducing global

GHG emission (Fig. 3D; Fig. S30a, S31a, and S32a), and for optimizing all five

objectives together (Fig. S30e, S31e, and S32e). The eastern United States,

southern China, Brazil, central India, and Guinea had the highest potential to

reduce water use (Fig. S30b, S31b, and S32b), land use (Fig. S30c, S31c, and

S32c), pesticide use (Fig. S30d, S31d, and S32d), and to increase farmer

income (Fig. S30e, S31e, and S32e). For more detailed results on replacing

global vegetable oil crop production area with Camellia by individually

optimizing specific objective across all six vegetable oil crops see Table S22 &

Fig. S26.

Socio-environmental co-benefits of global diversified vegetable oil production

After showing how prioritization modelling allows spatially explicit crop

replacement with Camellia as a case study, we quantify the environmental and

socioeconomic effects of such an exemplary crop replacement for diversified

global vegetable oil production. For simultaneously optimizing all five

objectives across all six vegetable oil crops in the conservative Camellia yield

scenario 1, we found that replacing 26.3 Mha (11.2%) of global vegetable oil

production with Camellia resulted in reduction of GHG emissions, water, land,

and pesticide use by 14.0% (172.1 Mt CO_2 eq/year), 4.9% (43.4 km^3/year),

7.3% (12.3 Mha/year), 9.3% (88.8 kt/year), respectively, and an increase of

farmer income by 82.6% (55.1 billion USD/year) (Fig. 3A). Compared to the

conservative yield scenario 1, Camellia yield improvement scenario 2 and the

ambitious technology and policy enabling yield scenario 3 reduced GHG

emissions 1.2 and 1.3 folds, water use 1.7 and 2.1 folds, land use 1.5 and 1.8

folds, pesticide use 1.4 and 1.7 folds, and increased farmer income 2.1 and

3.2 folds, respectively (for details see Fig. S26, Fig. 3A, Fig. 3B, and Fig. 3C).

For single-objective results under the three Camellia yield scenarios, refer to

Fig. S27, S28, and S29.

For simultaneously optimizing all five objectives and individual vegetable

oil crops in the conservative Camellia yield scenario 1, the replacing area for

these six oils production areas are as follows: soybean at 20.7 Mha (17.3%),

groundnut at 2.6 Mha (10.0%), rapeseed at 1.5 Mha (4.5%), oil palm at 0.7

Mha (3.7%), olive at 0.4 Mha (4.4%), and sunflower at 0.3 Mha (1.3%) (Fig. 2),

which are accounting for 8.8%, 1.1%, 0.7%, 0.3%, 0.2%, and 0.1% of all

vegetable oil crops harvested areas. The soybean area replacement then

results in the highest benefits of all five objectives, with 26.8% (146.5 Mt

CO_2eq), 7.7% (28.2 km^3), 11.9% (9.4 Mha), 15.6% (70.8 kt), and 156.3% (45.5

billion USD) of decreasing GHG emission, water use, land use, pesticide use,

and increasing farmer income, respectively. Replacing olive production areas

have the lowest effect on decreasing GHG emissions (0.5 Mt CO_2eq) and

increasing farmer income (0.6 billion USD), while replacing sunflower

production areas has the lowest effect on water use (0.7 km^3), land use (0.1

Mha), and pesticide use (0.3 kt).

Discussion

Our spatially explicit results on the environmental and economic impacts

of global vegetable oil production allow for targeted spatial planning and close

critically important knowledge gaps (15). The total GHG emissions of six main

vegetable oil crops, for soybean and for oil palm are 1.2 Gt CO_2eq/year, 0.5

Gt CO_2eq/year, and 0.4 Gt CO_2eq/year, respectively, which corresponds well

with non-spatial values of 1.9 Gt CO_2eq/year, 0.6 Gt CO_2eq/year, and 0.9

Gt CO_2eq/year, respectively (5). There is some variation in the total water uses

for each oil crop, because other studies only considered the green and blue

water use (37). However, irrigation and fertilization in traditional vegetable oil

crops production results in a significant grey water footprint (38), and, hence,

must be considered in the evaluations.

Our result also highlights the importance of using spatially explicit

analysis to identify differences in regional patterns. The total land use of six

vegetable oil crops is 168.3 Mha and, hence, lower compared to the harvested

area of 222.1 Mha, because we consider spatially explicit land occupation by

multiple cropping, intercropping, or fallow (see Methods) (2). We found

regional variation in land-use intensity to be low in rapeseed and sunflower but

high for the other four vegetable oil crops (Fig. S20). For instance, producing

1 liter oil requires up to 233.3 m^2/year of land in Portugal for olive oil and 135.1

m^2/year in South Africa for soybean oil (39,40). Our systematic literature

review and meta-analysis covered 10,500 pieces of regional or farm-level

input information in 43 countries (Fig. S3) and considered 108 scenarios of

replacement prioritization under potential yield developments when assessing

the impact of Camellia cultivation within all suitable areas. Therefore, our work

provides a robust systematic mapping of vegetable oil crops' environmental

impacts and exploration of global priority areas for long-term potential crop

substitution to date. More specially, with the increasing application of life cycle

assessment on the spatial scale (41,42), our research emphasizes the

importance of understanding the detailed spatial pattern of crop production

and the carbon–land–water nexus to identify potential cultivation improvement

strategies, land use planning, or crop site-specific redistribution/substitution.

Due to the differences in local climatic, topographic, soil, and farming

practices, the agricultural inputs, such as fertilizer and pesticides vary (43,44),

leading to the corresponding crop yields, farmer income, and environmental

output varying greatly in different regions. These variations would be

obscured if a regional or national level life cycle inventory were used, resulting

in missed opportunities for strategic crop substitution in priority areas.

Substitution of vegetable oil crop production with Camellia may not only

supply cooking oil, feed, biofuel, and cosmetics production, but also bring

additional opportunities for farmer livelihoods, nutrition security and

biodiversity conservation. First, Camellia production will likely contribute to

livelihood security, because Camellia replacement leads to vegetable oil

production increase in all our scenarios. In China, (www.ce.cn) (2024) the annual income generated from the Camellia oil supply chain exceeded 8.3 billion USD in 2023 and promoted rural development by increasing employment by 24.0% (4 million people) in Jiangxi Province (45). Farmer income is diversified through Camellia cultivation and, hence, may be less likely to be affected by external shocks from climate change depending on specific crop combinations. Second, Camellia oil is also of high nutritional value and may contribute to nutrition security if supplies increase. For instance, Camellia oil has the highest monounsaturated fatty acid composition compared to all other vegetable oils (Fig. 4a) and is rich in antioxidants. The oil has also alleged medicinal benefits such as regulating blood lipids, alleviating liver damage, and preventing Alzheimer disease (46) (Fig. 4b). Lastly, several studies have shown biodiversity benefits related to Camellia cultivation in agricultural landscapes through promoting soil aggregate formation and improving soil fertility (27,34,35). Our results suggest shifting from annual soybean, groundnut, or rapeseed systems to a perennial production system. Such a shift has been shown to reduce soil erosion, nutrient depletion and high pesticide input requirements (15,16). Moreover, Camellia production is suitable for agroforestry production, which by itself is known to enhance agrobiodiversity providing essential ecosystem services (47,48) and has been reported with soybean, groundnut, and rapeseed (49). Camellia agroforestry with soybean, corn and Purple Sweet Potato in China have been shown to regulate plantation air and soil temperature, and soil relative humidity, which in turn can enhance shoot growth of Camellia and understory plant diversity (50,51). In China, changes in the national policy to promote Camellia cultivation has facilitated restoration of degraded lands and promoting the 'ecological civilization' concept (52,53,54). Future research will likely expand quantification of the above aspects – and inevitably uncover local tradeoffs – that we can only discuss here based on singular case studies.

Benefits of a diversified global vegetable oil production are promising, but

implementation requires careful local evaluation and facilitation of an enabling

environment. First, infrastructure and financial subsidies are required to

support Camellia cultivation with high labor input and profitability during the

first 5 years of planting (55). For instance, large soybean estates only need

0.005 worker/ha in Brazil (15) but 0.247 worker/ha in Kenya (56), when

Camellia production needs 0.385 worker/ha (Table S5; Fig. S34). At present,

however, the price for Camellia oil is 8.9 ~ 17.7 times higher than soybean oil

(Fig. S22), which can somewhat compensate for higher labor costs in different

regions of the world. In the future, planting and harvesting technology will

advance and labor requirements for Camellia production will decrease, as it

has for instance been the case in cotton (57,58). Suitable subsidy pathways

may follow government schemes as seen for instance for cocoa agroforestry

production in Ghana, West Africa or impact investments into sustainable

agricultural landscapes (59,60). Second, lock-ins from cultural values, culinary

preferences, palatability, perceived health benefits, and social norms (61,62)

are of critical consideration. For instance, olive oil production in Italy is a

cultural heritage and likely much more difficult to substitute compared to soy

production in Brazil, which is driven by large corporations rather than culture

(12,63). Lastly, technology innovations for instance in breeding and farming

practices will close Camellia yield gaps and approaching yields similar to palm

oil, making crop substitutions more attractive to all stakeholders (Fig. 4c;

29,30) with sizable socioenvironmental benefits (64).

Overall, diversified vegetable oil production provides an important perspective

on how multi stakeholder collaboration can advance the Global Food systems

transformation. At the consumer level, overconsumption of vegetable oil is an

important issue around the world, with significant health concerns. In China,

the per capita consumption of vegetable oil is double of the WHO

recommended levels (65). Changing consumer behavior towards a decreased

total consumption globally will therefore magnify the benefits discussed here.

On the other hand, an increase in consumption of oils and fats among people

with malnutrition provides an affordable way to meet recommendations for

healthier diets (66). From a producer level, integrating Camellia with other oil

crops on existing low-efficient production areas as a locally adapted crop

diversification strategy enables income diversification and farm resilience, for

instance to climate impacts or soil infertility. This can be done through

agroforestry strategies or Camellia's ability to be cultivated on mountainous

wasteland without extensive land cover change, which is in stark contrast for

instance to oil crops like oil palm and soybean with major emissions driven by

forest biomass or organic soil burning. At the intergovernmental policy arena,

spatial optimization on a global scale is challenging due to the absence of a

central planner. Addressing this issue through trade and internalizing

externalities such as emissions, land use, and biodiversity impacts related to

crop cultivation could be a viable solution (67,68). The World Trade

Organization may, for instance, consider incorporating climate change and

environmental impacts into its future negotiations. So, while Camellia farms

can certainly not be regarded as a universal solution for sustainable vegetable

oil production, it is crucial to recognize the potential benefits and develop

strategies to harness them (15). Our approach to identify priority areas for

crop substitution with a limited proportion of the replacing areas is suitable for

other crop replacement evaluations in the context of diversified vegetable oil

production or cropping systems in general. Thus, this work can chart a

realistic pathway beyond diversified vegetable oil production with ramifications

for multiple agriculture-related sustainable development goals.

Methods

Methods

We first performed a comprehensive life cycle assessment (LCA) of six

major vegetable oil crops - groundnut, soybean, palm, rapeseed, sunflower,

and olive for a spatially explicit assessment of environmental and economic

effects. Spatially cover distribution (5 arc minute; 1/12°; ~10-km resolution) of

the six main vegetable oil crop-specific information were taken from the Global

Agroecological Zones (GAEZ) v4.0 database of the Food and Agriculture

Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (69). Owing to data limitations and

variation in the use of vegetable oil crops, we do not consider industrial

products, feed or animal meal and assume that their production remains

constant and unaffected under crop replacement (37). We then combined

global vegetable oil crop distribution datasets with a Camellia global habitat

suitability assessment, and production capacity modelling to enhance global

vegetable oil production efficiency through optimized vegetable oil crops land

allocation. Long-term climatic factors for land suitability assessment of

Camellia oleifera cultivation and average monthly precipitation data for water

use calculation of all crops were taken from the University of East Anglia's

Climate Research Unit CRU TS Version 4 (70). Growing stages, planting

dates, and crop coefficients were adapted from previous studies and FAO

Penman-Monteith ET_0 (37,71,72,73). We did not allow for increasing the

overall land area and oil yield loss from the replacement by Camellia

cultivation locally. We visualize our methods in Fig. S1 and provide details

below. A summary of all datasets and sources is provided in Table S24.

Mapping global vegetable oil environmental and economic impacts

The environmental impact results are calculated through an LCA

according to ISO norms (ISO14040, 2006; ISO14044, 2006) (74,75). For each

crop's vegetable oil system, we include the following life-cycle processes: the

production of inputs (such as fertilizers and electricity), transport of the inputs

to the plantation, and crop harvest in the agricultural stage and vegetable oil

production in the industrial stage to calculate the GHG emission for producing

1-liter oil. For water and land use, we mainly consider the stage of crop

production, since insignificant amounts of water and land are consumed

outside the production phase (76). Limited data availability prevented us from

extending our analysis to all production stages along the value chain.

Furthermore, we also calculated the quantity of pesticide use for producing 1-

liter oil and farmer income for per hectare land of Camellia production and all

other vegetable oil crops considered here (i.e., groundnut, palm, rapeseed,

soybean, sunflower, and olive). All the agricultural input data were collected

by conducting a meta-analysis of 285 studies with 837 observations

categorized as sub-national and national studies, covering 10,500 regional or

farm-level inventories globally (Extended Section 1.2).

GHG emission. For the GHG emissions from land use change, we

consider the above and below-ground C stock change, forest burning, and

organic soil burning, but excluding the leaching, runoff, and induced non-CO_2

emissions *sensu* Poor and Nemechek (16, 77). Specifically, we excluded the

CO_2 emissions from direct land use change of forest into cropping systems for

groundnut, olives, rapeseed, and sunflower crops, as the total percentage of

current crop area transformed from forest are on average less than 1%

globally and over two decades (78) (Table S9). Moreover, the small fraction of

forest related to land use change is difficult to address with available maps

globally. We then used the FAO statistical database to estimate CH_4 and N_2O

emissions from forest burning, and CO_2, CH_4, and N_2O emissions from organic

soil burning at the country level for all six vegetable oil crops (Table S11,

Table S12). As Camellia trees are not currently grown on a large scale

globally, we used a global-scale Terrestrial Ecosystem Model (79) to quantify

the potential impact of growing Camellia on land use change and carbon

emissions. The agricultural inputs for the seven types of vegetable oil crops

mainly include planting seeds or nurseries, fertilizers, agricultural film,

pesticides, diesel, and electric energy consumed by agricultural machinery or

water irrigation. For the oil processing stage, we collected the carbon

emission from the published papers by referring to the flow of 1 liter of

(refined) oil (Table S14). We estimate their GHG emissions through emission

factors and results are expressed in kg CO_2e kg^{-1} for crop fruit and kg CO_2e

$liter^{-1}$ for vegetable oil, with the global warming potential (GWP) of CH_4 and

N_2O being 34 and 298 kg CO_2 e kg^{-1}, respectively.

Water use. We use the CROPWAT 8.0 model and the FAO Penman-

Monteith equation to calculate green water and blue water footprints (71,80),

with considering the crop coefficient and potential evapotranspiration

(Equation 1). Here, the green water footprint represents the amount of

rainwater and soil moisture consumed by crops through evaporation or

transpiration without contributing to surface runoff. The blue water footprint

accounts for the surface water and groundwater consumed during the growth

of crops. The grey water footprint also was calculated to represent the water

consumption to dilute pollutant concentrations from fertilizer applications to

reach natural background concentrations or to meet ambient water quality

standards.

$$ET_0 = \frac{0.408\Delta \times (R_n - G) + 900\gamma/(T_{mean}+273) \times U_2 \times (e_s - e_a)}{\Delta + \gamma(1+0.34U_2)}$$ Eq. (1)

where ET_0 is the potential evapotranspiration; Δ is saturated water pressure

curve slope (kPa/°C); R_n is ground surface radiation of crop canopy surface

(MJ/(m*d)); G Soil heat flux (MJ/(m2·d)); γ is the wet and dry constant

(KPa/°C); T_{mean} is the daily average temperature at 2 meters (°C); U_2 is the

wind speed at 2 meters (m/s); e_s is the saturated water pressure (Kpa); e_a is

the actual water pressure (Kpa). The calculation process of Δ, R_n, γ, T_{mean},

and U_2 are referred to from "FAO Irrigation and Drainage Paper, No. 56, Crop

Evapotranspiration" (71) and the details are explained in Extended Section

3.2.3.

Land use. By taking the difference between temporary and permanent

crops into consideration, we divided the vegetable oil crops into two main

types namely temporary crops (groundnut, rapeseed, soybean, and sunflower)

and permanent crops or orchard crops (Camellia, palm, and olive). These

temporary and permanent oil crops have different cropping duration, growth

forms, and life cycle characteristics which influence land use (15). Land use

for each vegetable oil crop was calculated from occupation time and inverse

crop yields in each region, with actual yield for the current six types of

vegetable oil crops and three scenarios of potential yield for Camellia. Our

land use estimates for each vegetable oil are higher than those reported in

Poore and Nemecek (16), because we report the global average land use

intensity based on our detailed regional results.

Pesticide use. Unlike the life cycle assessment required to estimate the

processed-based GHG emission, crop water use, and land use, pesticide use

is assessed directly based on meta-analysis and official statistical data, with

studies being weighted in three ways: 1) within-region country weights; 2)

between-region country weights; and 3) between-country weights to enable

one geography reflecting another, where data was unavailable. For more

details see Extended Section 1.2.3. Here, the pesticide use excludes minerals

used for pest management, such as Sulphur or Copper, to make the amount

of substance and the amount of active ingredients comparable (Table S2).

Farmer income. The crop-specific total production was calculated based

on specific rainfed or irrigated yield and harvested areas. For the price of the

six vegetable oil crops considered here, we used the average value from 2017

to 2021 obtained from FAOSTAT to get the producer prices in each country

(USD Tonne^{-1}) (Table S23) (2). As currently Camellia is mainly planted in

China, the farmer incomes coefficient information was taken from the National

Development and Reform Commission (81) and producer prices of Camellia

seed were set as 19.74 RMB/Kg (100 USD = 660 RMB) (82). The farmer's net

profit varies based on the agricultural and labor inputs, such as the pesticide

and fertilizer use intensity. Hence, for each agricultural commodity selected,

we assumed a 20% margin of profit to obtain the opportunity cost for each

vegetable oil crop's fruits, as a likely conservative (that is, high) estimate

based on profit margins in the USA (non-small farms) (83), some EU countries

(84) and Canada (85). This simplified assumption results from limited data

availability and variable profit margins, in particular with farm sizes (86).

The potential distribution and yield supply of Camellia cultivation

Land suitability assessment.

To identify the potential of land distribution for planting Camellia, we

selected 11 indicators based on a comprehensive literature review from 3

aspects of climatic, topographic, and soil factors from multiple databases to

model the spatially explicit distribution of suitable areas. For a full description

of indicator selection, modelling details, and data sources, please see

Extended Section 2. As the weight of each indicator varies in published

papers, we used a "random forest" machine learning algorithm to identify the

weight for each indicator of current Camellia planting observations. Random

forests are robust to overfitting and variable importance when modelling crop

distributions and predicting the yields (87, 88). The decision to use a random-

forest approach was supported by its superior performance metrics compared

to other machine learning approaches (Fig. S9).

Beyond the natural environmental viability that we considered from the

land suitability assessment, we further identified five additional constraint

factors (land use type, terrestrial and inland protected areas, world roads

areas, intact forest landscapes, and global key biodiversity areas) that are

likely to limit the suitable areas for large-scale Camellia cultivation

development due to ecological protection or social constraints. For the land

use constraints, we ultimately considered excluding the land cover with

rainfed, irrigated, or post-flooding cropland, urban areas, water bodies, and

permanent snow or ice. After obtaining these spatially explicit data layers of

five constraint factors, we resampled each at a 0.083° resolution to match with

the 11 graphic data layers. We first processed the 11 indicators layer as

described in Table S16 to classify each grid into four classes, not suitable,

moderately suitable, suitable, or very suitable. For the five additional constraint

factors, we assume that some areas (for example, the areas within the

protected areas, the key biodiversity areas, or the intact forest) will be

completely unsuitable for planting Camellia. These five layers were further

processed to assign double-valued with 0 and 1, where 0 represents not

suitable and 1 represents suitable. These layers were then multiplied together

to create the overall global map of land suitability shown in Fig. S11. Field

verification in Extended Section 2.4 with an 88.20% cross-validation ratio

shows the high reliability of our land suitability assessment result.

iGAEZ modelling on potential yield.

To simulate crop yields globally for land suitable areas of Camellia, we

developed a new approach called iGAEZ (improved Global Agro-Ecological

Zones model) based on the GAEZ model (69). While GAEZ does provide

evaluation of the biophysical limitations and production potentials of land,

iGAEZ provides realistic crop yield combinations considering the whole

spectrum of climatic and agricultural conditions. iGAEZ model generates the

optimal crop parameter of the whole growth cycle to provide the best realistic

crop yield combinations. Doing this, the improved model takes regionally

differentiated climatic – social - economic status and crop condition into

account. The details of each procedure in the iGAEZ model are detailed in

Extended Section 3 with the results of the photosynthetic potential yield, light

and temperature potential yield, climatic potential yield, and natural

comprehensive potential yield, respectively (Fig. S13).

5.2.3 Scenario design.

We develop three scenarios in this study, namely, a conservative scenario

(S1), where the Camellia yield potential stays close to business-as-usual and

reflects actual yield. In the strategic improvement scenario (S2), we assume

implementation of advanced cultivation techniques and optimized input use to

achieve a 25% increase in Camellia yield over current levels. In a technology-

policy-enabling scenario (S3), both technology advances and policy improve

to promote diversified vegetable oil production with woody and environmental

oilseed yield. Every scenario is contingent upon the one before. Specifically, in

S1, estimates of yield growth were set as 50% of the final natural

comprehensive potential yield at any spatial scale for best indicating near the

actual yield. The actual yields for Camellia *seeds* are mainly collected from

China Agriculture Outlook (89) and the 2019 China Forestry and Grassland

Statistic yearbook (90). The current actual yield records of Camellia seed in

China for Anhui, Hunan, and Guangxi Province are 6.7, 7.8 and 6.5 t/ha,

respectively (91,92), which are still much lower than their yield potentials (that

is, 14.4 t/ha) but close to half of the yield potential. In S2, we made 75% of the

potential yield as an attainable or exploitable yield ceiling of Camellia. Due to

diminishing profits from investing in additional production inputs and labor as

yields approach the potential yield ceiling, present farm yields tend to plateau

when they reach 75–80% of potential yield, also known as the exploitable yield

ceiling (93,94). In S3, we assume a 100% potential yield of Camellia. This

assumes that technology-oriented policies are implemented and yield

improvement through technologies make 100% potential yield attainable.

Spatial prioritization of Camellia crop-replacing model

We applied a multicriteria optimization framework (95,96) to identify

global priority areas for replacement from current vegetable oil crops to

Camellia plantations and to quantify trade-offs and synergies across five

objectives, including GHG emission, water use, land use, pesticide use, and

farmer income. To do so, we: (i) estimated the current six main types of

vegetable oil crops planted worldwide and their producing environmental

impacts and farmer income; (ii) estimated potential long-term replacing

benefits by Camellia plantation across five objectives; (iii) implemented a

multicriteria optimization algorithm based on linear programming to show the

spatial prioritization ranking for Camellia planting areas; and (vi) simulated

different global replacement scenarios based on each objective or

comprehensive consideration under different Camellia yield potential. Our

study is global with a focus on all terrestrial regions suitable for production of

the six main types of vegetable oil crop from $-80°$ to $80°$ latitude and from

$-180°$ to $180°$ degrees longitude.

Trade-offs among five objectives for sustainable vegetable oil

production. To estimate the potential benefits of replacement from current

vegetable oil crops to Camellia plantation, we set our five objectives when

implementing the crop replacement to achieve a sustainable vegetable oil

production system, that is, (1) maximize GHG emission reductions, (2)

maximize water use reductions, (3) maximize land use reductions, (4)

maximize pesticide use reductions, and (5) maximize farmer income

increasing.

We first used the total oil production or the total harvested areas for each

oil crop to calculate the current total environmental and economic impacts

based on the previous results per liter of oil or hectare area in Section 1.3. For

each grid, the current (2015) vegetable oil production from each crop z of

rainfed ($OilPro_{Cur,Rai,i,z}$) and irrigated ($OilPro_{Cur,Irr,i,z}$) were calculated as

Equation 2.

$$OilPro_{Cur,Rai/Irr,i,z} = \alpha_z \times HarA_{Rai/Irr,i,z} \times OY_{Rai/Irr,i,z} \qquad \text{Eq.}$$

$$(2)$$

$$OY_{Rai/Irr,i,z} = \alpha_z \times Y_{Rai/Irr,i,z} \qquad \text{Eq. (3)}$$

$$EN_{Cur,Rai/Irr,i,z,j} = PL_{EN,i,z,j} \times OilPro_{Cur,Rai/Irr,i,z} \qquad \text{Eq. (4)}$$

665
$$EC_{Cur,Rai/Irr,i,z} = PH_{EC,i,z} \times HarA_{Rai/Irr,i,z} \qquad \text{Eq. (5)}$$

where $HarA$ is the harvested area (ha) for each vegetable oil crop in grid i; z

is the six types of vegetable oil crops with the value from 1, 2, 3, ..., 6 referring

to groundnut, soybean, palm, rapeseed, sunflower, and olive, respectively; α_z

is the oil extraction ratio for different crops to produce 1 liter (refined) oil

(Table S6). OY is the oil yield (kg/ha) by considering the crop fruits yield Y and

oil extraction ratio α_z; the subscripts Rai and Irr represent two cropping

systems in rainfed and irrigated, respectively; $PL_{EN,i,z,j}$ is the environmental

impact of producing per liter oil and j is the value of 1,2,3, and 4, representing

the environmental indicators with GHG emission, water use, land use, and

pesticide use, respectively. $PH_{EC,i,z}$ is the economic impact with the indicator

of net farmer income per hectare. $EN_{Cur,Rai/Irr,i,z,j}$ and $EC_{Cur,Rai/Irr,i,z}$ are the

total environmental and economic impact in grid i. Then, we estimated the

benefits of Camellia planting replacement, which can be expressed as:

679
$$\text{BEN}_{i,j} = \sum_{Z=1}^{6} \Delta PL_{EN,i,j} \times HarA_{Replaced,Rai/Irr,i,z} \times OY_{Rai/Irr,i,z} \qquad \text{Eq. (6)}$$

680
$$\text{BEC}_i = \sum_{Z=1}^{6} \Delta PH_{EC,i,j} \times HarA_{Replaced,Rai/Irr,i,z} \qquad \text{Eq. (7)}$$

681
$$\Delta PL_{EN,i,j} = PL_{EN,i,z,j} - PL'_{EN,i,CA,j} \qquad \text{Eq. (8)}$$

682
$$\Delta PH_{EC,i,j} = PH_{EC,i,z} - PH'_{EC,i,CA} \qquad \text{Eq. (9)}$$

where $\text{BEN}_{i,j}$ is the total replacing benefit of environmental indicator of j and

BEC_i is the total replacement economic benefit. Especially, after crop

replacement, it will possibly require additional transportation and transaction

costs, which farmers do not bear. We acknowledge that our model has the

limitations of not considering the additional costs and assumption of the

constant harvested area under crop replacement. Thus, we made a very

conservative estimation of replacing benefits by using the oil yield of original

crops instead of Camellia in Eq. (6) to offset partial impacts as the crop-

replacing constraint of higher oil yield compared to original crops. $PL'_{EN,i,CA,j}$

is the environmental impact of producing per liter Camellia oil under three

potential yield scenarios; $PH'_{EC,i,CA}$ is the net farmer income per hectare of

Camellia plantation. $\Delta PL_{EN,i,j}$ and $\Delta PH_{EC,i,j}$ are the differences between the

current crop and Camellia per unit of the environmental and economic impact.

$HarA_{Replaced,Rai/Irr,i,z}$ is the current harvested area (ha) of replaced locations.

Crop-replacing constraints. There is a need to determine the crop

replacement constraints to ensure successful implementation of crop

replacement. The first constraint in Equation 10 limits the location of the

vegetable oil crop to be replaced, which depends on the oil yield of Camellia

($OY_{i,CA}$). The requirement of higher or equal to the current vegetable oil yield is

to ensure no oil yield loss. In the second constraint for scale, A_i is the total

percentage of the current six types of vegetable oil crops harvested areas to

be replaced by Camellia. Based on recommendations from the literature (95),

the proportion of the areas replaced or fallowed is usually limited to a

maximum value of ΔCL = 20% to ensure global food market stability. In the

study, the maximum value of ΔCL = 23.5%, which is our estimated proportion

of all suitable areas for planting Camellia within the current vegetable oil

production areas to the total six main vegetable oil harvested areas. Here, we

assumed that the replaced harvested areas would remain the same with the

current crops once identifying replacement, which is for maintaining defined

crop-specific production and vegetable oil volumes (88). Furthermore, the

current crop-specific producing area will not expand to minimize the global

vegetable oil-producing land extent and directly avoid global burden-shifting,

especially for the land use pressure. The third constraint was implemented

based on pursuing different objectives. If we consider maximizing additional

environmental impact reductions, it requires $\Delta PL_{EN,i,j} \geq 0$ meaning the

environmental impact of producing per liter Camellia oil is lower than current

vegetable oil. If under the comprehensive consideration of all five objectives, it

requires both $\Delta PL_{EN,i,j} \geq 0$ per liter oil and $\Delta PH_{EC,i,j} \geq 0$ per planting hactare

area.

$\quad$ subject 1 to $OY_{i,CA} \geq OY_{Rai/Irr,i,z}$ $\hfill$ Eq. (10)

$\quad$ subject 2 to $\frac{\sum_{Z=1}^{6} HarA_{Replaced,Rai/Irr,i}}{\sum_{Z=1}^{6} HarA_{\text{total}}} = A_i \leq \Delta CL$ $\hfill$ Eq. (11)

$\quad$ subject 3 to $\Delta PL_{EN,i,j} \geq 0$ and/or $\Delta PH_{EC,i,j} \geq 0$ $\hfill$ Eq. (12)

Spatial prioritization ranking and scenarios setting. To identify the

priority areas for Camellia replacement to the current vegetable oil crops, we

ran a multicriteria optimization algorithm based on an objective function that

defines the amount of area to be replaced in each planning unit to maximize

benefits. By modelling 108 scenarios of replacement prioritization (3 potential

yield levels of Camellia × 6 types of main vegetable oil crops of groundnut,

soybean, palm, rapeseed, sunflower, and olive × 6 targets by trade-offs

among each five objective and/or the comprehensive consideration of all), we

aim to interplay with land potentially spared from low vegetable oil production

efficiency to achieve different replacing targets on environmental and/or

economic benefits. There are 100 priority levels in each scenario divided as

the equal grid number with the spatial layout of targeted replacing areas and

then ranked as the high benefits of each five objectives and/or the

comprehensive. All spatial prioritization ranking maps, unless otherwise noted,

were the result of aggregating the nested sets of priorities for total benefit

formulations by replacing six vegetable oil crops. For the comprehensive

consideration of all five objectives, an equal weighting was chosen to

understand how the five components trade off and to focus on the layout and

replacing scale of priority on a macro scale.

A - Greenhouse gas emissions

B – Water use

C – Land use

D – Pesticide use

E – Farmer income

753 Fig. 1: Global environmental and socioeconomic effect of the six main vegetable oil crops. It

754 shows the effects of six vegetable oil crops - groundnut, soybean, oil palm, rapeseed,

755 sunflower, and olive - on: GHG emissions (A), water use (B), land use (C), pesticide use (D),

756 and farmer income (E).

A – Groundnut

B – Soybean

C – Oil palm

Fig. 2: Priority areas for crop replacement with Camellia cultivation. Panels show the

replacement areas for six vegetable oil crops under a conservative Camellia yield scenario

(S1) and optimizing reduction of GHG emissions, water use, land use, pesticide use per liter

oil, and increase of farmer income per hectare land simultaneously: groundnut (A), soybean

(B), oil palm (C), sunflower (D), rapeseed (E), and olive (F). Note that for palm (C) and olive

(F), we zoom in to continent level as replacing areas would be difficult to see otherwise.

Priorities refer to the highest (red: 1–10) to lowest (blue: 90–100) valuable areas for Camellia

replacement to achieve simultaneous objective optimization.

Fig. 3: Global spatial priority areas for Camellia replacement to optimize all five

socioenvironmental co-benefit objectives simultaneously. For a conservative (A), strategic (B),

and technology-policy-enabling Camellia yield improvement scenario (C) when all five

objectives are optimized simultaneously with reducing GHG emission, water use, land use,

and pesticide use per liter oil, and increasing farmer income per hectare land. The histograms

and radar plots show the total replacing areas for each vegetable oil crop and quantified

benefits for each objective, respectively. Spatial benefits of vegetable oil crop replacement

differ between continents and crops as shown for the conservative Camellia yield scenario

(S1) (D). The black color shows the Camellia replacing pattern for each vegetable oil crop. For

details see main text.

Fig. 4: Spatial pattern of potential maximum yield increase from Camellia diversified global

vegetable oil production. The nutritional value (a) and medicinal benefits (b) of Camellia oil.

The oil yield improvement opportunity under a technology-policy-enabling scenario (S3; 100%

potential yield) to replace local vegetable oil crops according to the comprehensive

consideration of all objectives (c).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Conceptualization - SZ, FC, TCW; Formal Analysis - SZ, CZ; Data Curation - SZ, KFD; Writing – Original Draft Preparation - SZ, TCW; Investigation - SZ; Writing – Review & Editing - All authors; Supervision – TCW

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

Funding was provided by a Westlake University start-up fund to TCW.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at

References

1. Burki, T. Food security and nutrition in the world. *The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology* **10**, 622 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587(22)00220-0

2. Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations. Statistical database (FAO, 2023). https://www.fao.org/faostat

3. Lu, C., Napier, J.A., Clemente, T.E., & Cahoon, E.B. New frontiers in oilseed biotechnology: meeting the global demand for vegetable oils for food, feed, biofuel, and industrial applications. *Current opinion in biotechnology* **22**, 252–259 (2011). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copbio.2010.11.006

4. Porfirio, L.L., Newth, D., Finnigan, J.J. et al. Economic shifts in agricultural

production and trade due to climate change. *Humanities and social*

sciences communications **4**, 111 (2018). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-

018-0164-y

5. Li, Y., Zhong, H., Shan, Y. et al. Changes in global food consumption

increase GHG emissions despite efficiency gains along global supply

chains. *Nat Food* **4**, 483–495 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-023-

00768-z

6. Meijaard, E., Brooks, T.M., Carlson, K.M. et al. The environmental impacts of

palm oil in context. *Nat. Plants* **6**, 1418–1426 (2020).

https://doi.org/10.1038/s41477-020-00813-w

7. Liu, Z., Ying, H., Chen, M. et al. Optimization of China's maize and soy

production can ensure feed sufficiency at lower nitrogen and carbon

footprints. *Nat Food* **2,** 426–433 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-

021-00300-1

8. Marin, F.R., Zanon, A.J., Monzon, J.P. et al. Protecting the Amazon Forest

and reducing global warming via agricultural intensification. *Nat Sustain* **5**,

1018–1026 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-022-00968-8

9. Carlson, K.M. et al. Effect of oil palm sustainability certification on

deforestation and fire in Indonesia. *P Natl A Sci* **115**, 121–126 (2018).

https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1704728114

10. Xu, Y., Yu, L., Ciais, P. et al. Recent expansion of oil palm plantations into

carbon-rich forests. *Nat Sustain* **5**, 574–577 (2022).

https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-022-00872-1

11. Meijaard, E. et al. Oil palm and biodiversity: a situation analysis by the

IUCN Oil Palm Task Force. 2018. The Center for International Forestry

Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF).

https://doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.CH.2018.11.en

12. Song, X., Hansen, M.C., Potapov, P. et al. Massive soybean expansion in
South America since 2000 and implications for conservation. *Nat Sustain*
4, 784–792 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-021-00729-z

13. Alcock, T.D., Salt, D.E., Wilson, P., & Ramsden, S.J. More sustainable
vegetable oil: Balancing productivity with carbon storage opportunities.
Sci Total Environ **829,** 154539 (2022).
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.154539

14. Xie, W. et al. Crop switching can enhance environmental sustainability and
farmer incomes in China. *Nature* **616,** 300–305 (2023).
https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-05799-x

15. International Union for Conservation of Nature. Exploring the future of
vegetable oils: oil crop implications: fats, forests, forecasts, and futures
(2024). https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/51451

16. Poore, J. & Nemecek, T. Reducing food's environmental impacts through
producers and consumers. *Science* **360**, 987–992(2018).
https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaq0216

17. European Commission. Proposal for a regulation on deforestation-free
products (European Commission, 2021).
https://environment.ec.europa.eu/publications/proposal-regulation-
deforestation-free-products_en

18. European Commission. Annexes to the proposal for a regulation on
deforestation-free products - impact assessment report (European
Commission, 2021).
https://ec.europa.eu/environment/publications/proposal-regulation-
deforestation-free-products_en

19. Santika, T., Wilson, K.A., Law, E.A. et al. Impact of palm oil sustainability
certification on village well-being and poverty in Indonesia. *Nat Sustain* **4,**
109–119 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-020-00630-1

20. Yang, X., Xiong, J., Du, T. et al. Diversifying crop rotation increases food
production, reduces net greenhouse gas emissions and improves soil

health. *Nature Communications* **15**, 198 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-023-44464-9

21. He, X., Batáry, P., Zou, Y. et al. Agricultural diversification promotes

sustainable and resilient global rice production. *Nat Food* **4,** 788–796

(2023). https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-023-00836-4

22. Toledo-Hernández, M. et al. Genome-edited tree crops: mind the

socioeconomic implementation gap. *Trends in Ecol Evol* **36**, 972–975

(2021). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2021.08.007

23. Temani, F., Bouaziz, A., Daoui, K., Wery, J., & Barkaoui, K. Olive

agroforestry can improve land productivity even under low water

availability in the South Mediterranean. *Agr Ecosyst Environ* **307**, 107234

(2021). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.agee.2020.107234

24. Burgess, P. J., & Rosati, A. Advances in European agroforestry: results

from the AGFORWARD project. *Agroforest Syst* **92**, 801–810 (2018).

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10457-018-0261-3

25. Ratledge, C. & Cohen, Z. Microbial and algal oils: do they have a future for

biodiesel or as commodity oils? *Lipid Technol* **20**, 155–160 (2008).

https://doi.org/10.1002/lite.200800044

26. Parsons, S., Raikova, S. & Chuck, C.J. The viability and desirability of

replacing palm oil. *Nat Sustain* **3,** 412–418 (2020).

https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-020-0487-8

27. Liu, J., et al. Development of a soil quality index for Camellia Oleifera

forestland yield under three different parent materials in Southern China.

Soil and Tillage Research **176**, 45–50 (2018).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.still.2017.09.013

28. Liang, H., Hao, B., Chen, G., Ye, H., & Ma, J. Camellia as an oilseed crop.

HortScience, **52,** 488-497 (2017).

https://doi.org/10.21273/HORTSCI11570-16

29. Lin, P., Wang, K., Wang, Y. et al. The genome of oil-Camellia and
population genomics analysis provide insights into seed oil domestication.
Genome Biol **23,** 14 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1186/s13059-021-02599-2
30. Yao, X. & Wang, K. Forest food bank with a big food perspective: Bringing
technological Camellia to all of the country's oil producing regions.
(Chinese Academy of Forestry Sciences) (2024);
https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ESG7lglNeetcoNKDFMfOjw
31. Long, L., Gao, C., Qiu, J. et al. Fatty acids and nutritional components of
the seed oil from Wangmo red ball Camellia grown in the low-heat valley
of Guizhou, China. *Sci Rep* **12,** 16554 (2022).
https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-20576-y
32. Yang. H., et al. Progress of research on quality characteristics of Camellia
oleifera seed oil. *J Chinese Cereals Oils* 1–19 (2024).
https://doi.org/10.20048/j.cnki.issn.1003-0174.000786
33. Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Affairs of China. The 14th Five-Year Plan
for the Development of the National Plantation Industry (in Chinese)
(2022);
http://www.moa.gov.cn/govpublic/ZZYGLS/202201/t20220113_6386808.ht
m
34. Lu, S., et al. Co-analysis of rhizosphere metabolomics and bacterial
community structures to unfold soil ecosystem health in Camellia Oleifera
land under long-term cultivation. *Applied Soil Ecology* **171**, 104336
(2022). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apsoil.2021.104336
35. Luo, Z., et al. Dynamic of organic matter, nutrient cycling, and PH in soil
aggregate particle sizes under long-term cultivation of Camellia Oleifera.
Journal of Soil Science and Plant Nutrition (2024).
https://doi.org/10.1007/s42729-024-01682-4
36. International Union for Conservation of Nature. Mapping global impacts for
all vegetable oils key to sustainability: IUCN study (2020).

https://www.iucn.org/news/science-and-economics/202012/mapping-

global-impacts-all-vegetable-oils-key-sustainability-iucn-study

37. Davis, K.F., Rulli, M.C., Seveso, A. et al. Increased food production and

reduced water use through optimized crop distribution. *Nature Geosci* **10,**

919–924 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41561-017-0004-5

38. Mekonnen, M. M., & Hoekstra, A. Y. Global gray water footprint and water

pollution levels related to anthropogenic nitrogen loads to fresh water.

Environ Sci Technol **49**, 12860–12868 (2015).

https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.5b03191

39. Figueiredo, F. et al. Life-cycle greenhouse gas emissions of portuguese

olive oil. In: Proceedings from Energy for Sustainability 2013, Sustainable

Cities: Designing for People and the Planet, Coimbra, 8-10th September

(2013).

40. Stephenson, A. L. et al. Global warming potential and fossil-energy

requirements of biodiesel production scenarios in South Africa. *Energy &*

Fuels **24**, 2489–2499 (2010). https://doi.org/10.1021/ef100051g

41. Yang, Y., Pelton, R. E. O., Kim, T. & Smith, T. M. Effects of spatial scale on

life cycle inventory results. *Enviro. Sci Technol* **54,** 1293–1303 (2020).

https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.9b03441

42. Schomberg, A.C., Bringezu, S., Flörke, M. et al. Spatially explicit life cycle

assessments reveal hotspots of environmental impacts from renewable

electricity generation. *Commun Earth Environ* **3,** 197 (2022).

https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-022-00521-7

43. Qiao, L., Wang, X., Smith, P. et al. Soil quality both increases crop

production and improves resilience to climate change. *Nat. Clim. Chang.*

12, 574–580 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-022-01376-8

44. Ray, D. K. et al. Climate variation explains a third of global crop yield

variability. *Nat. Commun.* **6,** 5989 (2015).

45. The China Economy (www.ce.cn). 16.76 million mu of Camellia forests, livelihood forests for 4 million people (2024). http://www.ce.cn/cysc/stwm/gd/202401/23/t20240123_38877015.shtml

46. Li, Z., et al. Bioactive substances and therapeutic potential of camellia oil: An overview. *Food Biosci* **49**, 101855 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fbio.2022.101855

47. Tscharntke, T., Clough, Y., Wanger, T. C. et al. Global food security, biodiversity conservation and the future of agricultural intensification. *Biol Conserve* **151**, 53–59 (2012). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2012.01.068

48. Zaccari, C., et al. Lessons learned from the second international agrobiodiversity congress: Adopting agricultural biodiversity as a catalyst for transformative global food systems. *Curr Opin Environ Sci Heal* **31**, 100411 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.coesh.2022.100411

49. National Forestry and Grassland Administration of China. Technical regulation for economic crop planting under the Camellia Forest (in Chinese) (2018); http://www.hunanchayou.cn/uploadfile/202011/4fa4fc365c8c.pdf

50. Zuo, J., Shao, Y., Zhou, W., Sun, Y. Studies on the effect of shooting growth and land meteorological factor under intercropping Camellia oleifera. *South China Forestry Sci* **45**, 4-6+19 (2017). https://doi.org/10.16259/j.cnki.36-1342/s.2017.02.002

51. Zhao, Z. Comparative study on different compound management modes of low-efficiency camellia oleifera forest. *Huazhong Agricultural University* (2021). https://doi.org/10.27158/d.cnki.ghznu.2021.001162

52. People's Daily of China. The Camellia has made great achievements (2023); http://env.people.com.cn/n1/2023/1010/c1010-40091844.html

53. National Forestry and Grassland Administration of China. Recommendations on Accelerating the high-quality development of the Camellia oil industry" Reply (No. 6417 of 2021). (in Chinese) (2021); https://www.forestry.gov.cn/c/www/gkjyfw/60310.jhtml

54. Lin, Y., Wang, Y. & Li, Y. Investigation on the current situation of
Guangdong special Camellia industry in Heyuan city and its high-quality
development strategy. *China Oils and Fats* (2024) (In press).
https://doi.org/10.19902/j.cnki.zgyz.1003-7969.230548.
55. Zhang, X. et al. Effects of fruit load on growth, photosynthesis, biochemical
characteristics, and fruit quality of Camellia. *Scientia Horticulturae* **317**,
112046 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scienta.2023.112046
56. Vandeplas, I., Vanlauwe, B., Driessens, L., Merckx, R. & Deckers, J.
Reducing labour and input costs in soybean production by smallholder
farmers in south-western Kenya. *Field Crop Res* 117, 70-80 (2010).
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fcr.2010.02.002
57. Bennett, J., Woodhouse, N.P., Keller, T., Jensen, & Antille, T.D. Advances
in cotton harvesting technology: A review and implications for the John
Deere Round Baler Cotton Picker. *J Cotton Sci* 19, 225-249 (2015).
https://doi.org/10.56454/TJVG6340
58. Dai, J. & Dong, H. Intensive cotton farming technologies in China:
Achievements, challenges and countermeasures. *Field Crop Res* 155, 99-
110 (2014). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fcr.2013.09.017
59. Blaser, W.J., Oppong, J., Hart, S.P. et al. Climate-smart sustainable
agriculture in low-to-intermediate shade agroforests. *Nat Sustain* **1**, 234–
239 (2018). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0062-8
60. World Cocoa Foundation. Cocoa and Forests Initiative (2021).
https://www.worldcocoafoundation.org/initiative/cocoa-forests-initiative/
61. Zeng, S., Li, J. & Wanger, T. C. Agroecology, technology, and stakeholder
awareness: Implementing the UN Food Systems Summit call for action.
iScience **26**, 107510 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2023.107510.
62. Chwialkowska, A., Bhatti, W. A. & Glowik, M. The influence of cultural
values on pro-environmental behavior. *J Clean Prod* **268**, 122305 (2020).
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.122305

63. Lombardo, L., Farolfi, C., Tombesi, S. et al. Development of a sustainability

technical guide for the Italian olive oil supply chain. *Sci Total Environ* **820**,

153332 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.153332

64. Luan, F. et al. Recent advances in Camellia Abel: A review of nutritional

constituents, biofunctional properties, and potential industrial applications.

J Funct Foods **75**, 104242 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jff.2020.104242

65. OECD/FAO (2023), OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook 2023-2032, OECD

Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/08801ab7-en

66. Meijaard, E., Abrams, J.F., Slavin, J.L. & Sheil, D., 2022. Dietary fats,

human nutrition and the environment: balance and sustainability. *Front*

Nutr **9**, 25 (2022). https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2022.878644

67. Wanger, T. C. et al. Integrating agroecological production in a robust post-

2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. *Nat. Ecol. Evol.* **4**, 1150–1152 (2020).

https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-020-1262-y

68. Hong, C. et al. Land-use emissions embodied in international trade.

Science 376, 597-603 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abj1572

69. Global Agro-ecological Zones (GAEZ) v4.0 (IIASA/FAO, 2015).

70. Harris, I., Osborn, T.J., Jones, P. & Lister, D. Version 4 of the CRU TS

monthly high-resolution gridded multivariate climate dataset. *Sci Data* **7,**

109 (2020).

71. Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations. Crop

evapotranspiration: Guidelines for computing crop requirements. Irrigation

and drainage paper No. 56. (FAO, Rome) (1998).

72. Wang, X. & Yi, X. Study on the method of deducing the crop coefficient of

sasanqua based on dynamic data. *Pearl River* **39**, 97–101(2018).

73. Mekonnen, M.M. & Hoekstra, A.Y. The green, blue and grey water footprint

of crops and derived crop products. *Hydrol Earth Syst Sci* **15,** 1577–1600

(2011).

74. ISO, 2006. ISO 14040:2006 Environmental Management - Life Cycle

Assessment - Principles and Framework. International Organization for

Standardization (ISO), Geneva.

75. ISO, 2006. ISO 14044:2006 Environmental Management - Life Cycle

Assessment - Requirements and Guidelines. International Organization for

Standardization, Geneva, Switzerland.

76. Liu, B., Gu, W., Yang, Y. et al. Promoting potato as staple food can reduce

the carbon–land–water impacts of crops in China. *Nat Food* **2,** 570–577

(2021). https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-021-00337-2

77. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2006 IPCC

Guidelines for National Greenhouse Gas Inventories, H. S. Eggleston, L.

Buendia, K. Miwa, T. Ngara, K. Tanabe, Eds. (Institute for Global

Environmental Strategies) (2006).

78. Blonk Consultants. Direct land use change assessment tool. (Version

2013.1) (2013).

79. Qin, Z., Zhuang, Q., Zhu, X., Cai, X. & Zhang, X. Carbon consequences

and agricultural implications of growing biofuel crops on marginal

agricultural lands in China. *Environ Sci Technol* **45**, 10765–10772 (2011).

https://doi.org/10.1021/es2024934

80. Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations. CROPWAT 8.0

model. (FAO, Rome) (2010). https://www.fao.org/land-water/databases-

and-software/cropwat/en/

81. National Development and Reform Commission Price Division (NDRCPD).

Cost-benefit of Agricultural Products in China (in Chinese) (China

Statistics Press, 2022).

82. Yang, Y. et al. Research on fruit quality of Changlin series of Camellia in

northern production area. *Chinese Journal of Oil Crop Sciences* **44**, 562–

569 (2022). https://doi.org/10.19802/j.issn.1007-9084.2021112.

83. Hoppe, R. A. Structure and Finances of U.S. Farms: Family Farm Report

(EIB-132) (US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service,

2014).

84. Baležentis, T. et al. Decomposing dynamics in the farm profitability: an

application of index decomposition analysis to Lithuanian FADN sample.

Sustainability **11**, 2861 (2019). https://www.mdpi.com/2071-

1050/11/10/2861

85. Statistic Canada. Table 32-10-0136-01, Farm Operating Revenues and

Expenses, Annual. (2008)

https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/59ca6332-391b-4fdf-bb3a-

31e5e45f6bb7.

86. Strassburg, B.B.N., Iribarrem, A., Beyer, H.L. et al. Global priority areas for

ecosystem restoration. *Nature* **586**, 724–729 (2020).

https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2784-9

87. Breiman, L. Random forests. *Mach. Learn.* **45**, 5–32 (2001).

https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1010933404324

88. Zhao, J., Chen, J., Beillouin, D. et al. Global systematic review with meta-

analysis reveals yield advantage of legume-based rotations and its drivers.

Nat Commun **13,** 4926 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-32464-

0

89. Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Affairs of China. China Agriculture

Outlook (2020–2029). (in Chinese) (2020); https://agri-

outlook.cn/index/index/article.html?id=1376

90. National Forestry and Grassland Administration of China. The China

Forestry and Grassland Statistic yearbook (2019). (in Chinese) (2020);

http://cnki.nbsti.net/CSYDMirror/trade/Yearbook/Single/N2021060073?z=

Z010

91. Lu, S. et al. Comparison of fruit growth dynamics and economic

characteristics of four *Camellia* clones. *Non-wood Forest Research* **38**, 46-

52 (2020). https://doi.org/10.14067/j.cnki.1003-8981.2020.02.006.

92. National Forestry and Grassland Administration of China. This year's

Camellia harvest is a certainty (2021).

https://www.forestry.gov.cn/main/586/20211103/084728001949510.html

93. Espe, M.B. et al. Yield gap analysis of US rice production systems shows

opportunities for improvement. *Field Crops Res* **196**, 276–283 (2016).

https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0378429016302210

94. Deng, N., Grassini, P., Yang, H. et al. Closing yield gaps for rice self-

sufficiency in China. *Nat Commun* **10**, 1725 (2019).

https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-09447-9

95. Zeng, S., Chen, F., Liu, GJ. et al. Fallow priority areas for spatial trade-offs

between cost and efficiency in China. *Commun Earth Environ* **4**, 183

(2023). https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-023-00850-1

96. Strassburg, B.B.N. et al. Global priority areas for ecosystem restoration.

Nature **586,** 724–729 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2784-9

1123