

Pura Vida Coffee: An example of environmental,
economic and social sustainability

Kristen Frentzel
November 9, 2006
ENVS 664

Pura Vida is a Seattle-based coffee company. That is nothing new. However, compared to the many other Seattle-based coffee companies, Pura Vida stands out. If the saying went “there is a Pura Vida on every corner” the world would probably be a better place. This is because the way Pura Vida Coffee operates is entirely unique. The company is 100% charitably owned and uses all of its profits to benefit at-risk children and their families in coffee-growing countries around the world (Press Release Oct 2005). Their certified Fair Trade organic shade grown coffee is marketed as a green product. The coffee has many sustainable features, but what about the process of growing, transporting, marketing, selling and disposing of the coffee? Pura Vida claims to operate as a sustainable company from their coffee to their cups to their cafes. They ensure that their products will provide environmental, social and economic benefits over their commercial cycle, from the production of the coffee beans to the purchase and right down to the decomposition of the coffee cups and sleeves.

Pura Vida Coffee carries only certified Fair Trade, organic, shade grown coffee, which raises the living standards of the farmers and their communities while protecting the environment. All of Pura Vida’s coffee bean farms have been inspected and certified to be organic. This means that the farms do not use any chemical inputs, which protects the integrity of the soil, water and wildlife in the ecosystem. The Pura Vida Coffee beans are inspected at each step of the processing chain so that the integrity of the organic label is upheld from source to cup (Pura Vida website).

All of Pura Vida’s coffee is certified Fair Trade so that the economic sustainability of the farmers is protected. Pura Vida Coffee is certified by TransFair USA, the only independent, third party certifier of Fair Trade products in the United States (Pura Vida website). They follow the international Fair trade criteria for coffee, which means several things. Farmer cooperatives are guaranteed a fair price, the requirement being 5 cents above the market price per pound or 15 cents above the market price for certified organic coffee (Pura Vida website). The price incentive for organically grown coffee encourages producers to work towards environmentally superior production practices. Whether or not the coffee is grown organically, the producers must implement integrated crop management and environmental protection plans. To focus on stability and sustainability, the importers are required to purchase the coffee directly from the Fair

Trade producers and agree to establish stable, long-term relationships. Fair trade farmers must belong to cooperatives, which are democratically controlled by members and transparent.

All of Pura Vida's coffee is shade grown. Until 25 years ago, when full-sun hybrids were developed, this was the only way coffee could be grown because it is naturally a shade-loving shrub (Grounds for Change website). The full sun coffee hybrids allow for massive agribusiness-style plantations that increase yields at the expense of the environment. The forests are clear-cut for these plantations, which increases soil erosion and mudslides and increases the use of chemicals, which produce toxic runoff and acidify the soil (Grounds for Change website). In many coffee-growing countries, the majority of forests still standing are in traditional coffee plantations (Northwest Shade Coffee Campaign website). These natural shade-grown coffee plantations are often the last refuge for migratory birds, whose populations have been devastated by the clear cutting of tropical forests. Full-sun coffee plantations have 95% fewer bird species than their shaded counterparts (Grounds for Change website). By supporting shade-grown coffee farms, Pura Vida is contributing to environmental sustainability by promoting the biodiversity of migratory birds. Shade grown coffee shrubs also live twice as long as their full-sun counterparts and they generate natural mulch, which means less replanting and less need for chemical fertilizers (Grounds for Change website).



Figure 1: Shade grown coffee in Costa Rica. The tall trees shade the coffee plants, prevent soil erosion and provide habitat for many migratory birds. Source: http://www.consciouscoffees.com/costa_rica.htm

Pura Vida does much to ensure that its coffee is produced in a sustainable manner. However, to decide whether or not the coffee is a green product, it is necessary to analyze every part of its lifecycle. We have established that the coffee is grown in a sustainable manner, with no pesticides, heartier plants, decreased soil erosion and protection of wildlife habitat. But what happens to the beans after they are harvested?

Pura Vida imports coffee from many countries, including Ethiopia, Indonesia, Columbia and Hawaii. It is always touted that buying locally grown produce is a sustainable practice. Pura Vida's importation is the opposite extreme. Perhaps it would not be fair to judge Pura Vida on this factor, since it is not practical or possible to produce locally grown coffee. However, there are ways that the company could reconcile this deficiency. The import of their coffee from around the globe produces massive amounts of CO₂ emissions. Pura Vida could offset these emissions by purchasing credits from green energy producers. However, they do not, which takes some credit away from their "green product" claims.

Pura Vida is not a chain coffee store. They are a coffee distributor who sells mainly to offices and organizations whose purpose is something other than selling coffee. They have many cafes on college campuses and drip coffee machines in office park lunchrooms. This means that the people who buy Pura Vida coffee are not driving out of their way to get it. They are not pulling into a parking lot reserved for the coffee shop, turning off their car to go in and then starting their car again five minutes later to continue their trip. Less fuel is being consumed, there are less impervious surfaces due to parking lots and stores and less greenfield sites are being eaten up. It is comparable to the "density" credit for LEED certified buildings. Especially on college campuses, people are walking to the café to purchase their coffee. This is inherently sustainable.



Figure 2: Pura Vida has cafes on more than 75 colleges and universities nationwide. People are walking to these cafes instead of driving, which is a sustainable feature. Source: <http://www.puravidacoffee.com>

Aside from their walkability, there are several other sustainable features of Pura Vida's cafes. According to John Sage, CEO of Pura Vida, "Our Sustainable Café program is designed from scratch with sustainability in mind as a showcase for our unique family of beverages – from the sustainably-harvested wood flooring, to countertops made from recycled material, to our beautiful tree-free, soy-ink posters hanging on the walls (Press Release Oct 2005)." Pura Vida also serves its coffee in 100% biodegradable cups made of natural cornstarches so it is readily compostable (Press Release July 2005). They offer coffee cup sleeves that are made from 100% recycled materials and printed on using soy-based ink. In relation to other disposable materials, this seems sustainable. However, the use of so many disposable cups and sleeves is wasteful and unsustainable regardless of what they are made of. Pura Vida should offer refillable mugs so that customers do not have to get a new cup every time they come in. They could also offer a discount for refills so that there is financial incentive for people to reuse their mugs. Coffee sleeves are used to insulate your hand from the heat of the coffee. They may be necessary, but they are also wasteful. When people are done their coffee they dispose of the cup and the sleeve. However, the sleeves could easily be re-used because they never touch the coffee or the mouth of the person drinking it. I think that Pura Vida cafes could improve their sustainability and reduce waste if they had a collection basket for these sleeves. People could then decide if they wanted to re-use a sleeve or get a new one for themselves.

In reality, the most sustainable way for people to purchase coffee would be to make it at home. There would be less waste, since the same coffee mug and pot could be used every day. There would also be no fuel consumed in the process, aside from that used to deliver the coffee. However, I believe that Pura Vida coffee is a legitimate green product because they try to encourage and promote sustainability in many ways. The coffee itself is truly green and they attempt to keep the processes of its use as green as possible. The fact that Pura Vida is a charitably owned business is important as well. If you go to Starbucks or Wawa to buy coffee, you can count on your money going towards a large house for the owners or a new chain on a greenfield site somewhere. With Pura Vida, the profits feed directly back into the community. Their mission statement says, “We believe in a different approach to business. One driven by good rather than greed. One that sees capitalism as an agent for compassion. Operated for charitable benefit, Pura Vida helps farmers, families and at-risk children in coffee growing communities around the world to build more hopeful futures. The work of Pura Vida is rooted in a desire to empower the poor in coffee-growing regions of the world (Pura Vida website).” This shows that Pura Vida is not only environmentally sustainable, but truly socially and economically sustainable as well. The Sustainable Products Corporation defines a sustainable product as one that provides environmental, social and economic benefits while protecting public health, welfare and the environment over its entire commercial cycle. I believe that Pura Vida’s coffee satisfies this definition and is therefore a truly green and sustainable product.

References

Grounds for Change website: < <http://www.groundsforchange.com/>>

Green Seal Standards and Certification. < <http://www.greenseal.org>>

Northwest Shade Coffee Campaign website: < <http://www.shadecoffee.org/>>

Pura Vida Press Release “Pura Vida Coffee First to Offer 100% Sustainable Beverage Cups and Sleeves”. Seattle, Washington, July 11, 2005. < http://www.puravidacoffee.com/toolkit/articles/sustainable_cups_and_sleeves.pdf>

Pura Vida Press Release. “Students at Campuses Coast to Coast are Demanding Pura Vida’s Sustainable Cafes: Campuses nationwide turn to Pura Vida Coffee to meet student demand for socially and environmentally responsible café solutions”. Seattle, Washington, October 3, 2005. < http://www.puravidacoffee.com/toolkit/articles/press_release_sustainable_cafes.pdf>

Pura Vida website: < <http://www.puravidacoffee.com/index.asp>>

Sustainable Products Corporation website:

< <http://www.sustainableproducts.com/susproddef.html>>