

*Natural rubber's history began with Mesoamerican civilizations harvesting liquid latex. The material became globally vital after Charles Goodyear invented vulcanization in 1839, a process heating rubber with sulfur to keep it stable. This triggered a brutal colonial "rubber boom." In the late 19th century, European powers established vast plantations, most notoriously in King Leopold II's Congo Free State, where millions of Indigenous people were subjected to forced labor, mutilation, and death to meet the West's demand.*

*Today, workers still "tap" tree bark to harvest the milky sap, which is coagulated, rolled, and dried. However, the industry's dark history echoes in modern social and environmental crises. Massive tropical deforestation across Southeast Asia destroys precious biodiversity to make way for monoculture plantations.*

*Socially, systemic exploitation persists. Because volatile market prices squeeze smallholder families, child labor remains a significant issue today, with children frequently pulled from school to help tap trees, handle hazardous chemical acids, and clear brush.*

*Furthermore, the final product is incredibly difficult to recycle. Because vulcanization creates irreversible chemical bonds, rubber cannot be melted down and reformed. It can only be downcycled, mechanically shredded into lower-value materials like playground mulch or asphalt filler.*