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SHELTER magazine.

What's In Your Wood? Knowing About the Wood You Buy

China's Yangtze River expanded beyond its banks and claimed the lives of 3,600 people in 1998. China's government responded with logging bans. Why? It blamed deforestation. But the resulting flood did not wash away the demand for Chinese wood products, so, while the country began to protect and replant its own forests, Chinese companies began to rely more heavily on foreign timber providers.¹

Mismanaging forest resources can have a significant impact on the global environment, and some of the products you carry could be contributing to over deforestation.

If you don't know where the wood components come from for the products you carry, odds are they're being imported from China. However, China has no domestic

timber to cut, so there is also a possibility that these products are a result of illegal logging in Burma and Russia, which undermines environmental efforts and/or abuses human rights. Forests play a large role in climate change by affecting the amount of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has carried out assessments of the world's forests in five- to ten-year intervals since 1946. According to the FAO, forests cover approximately 30 percent of the earth's total land area. Approximately half are designated for production of forest products. But many people in poor countries rely on the same forests to survive. One billion people, according to the World Bank.

In Kachin state, in Northeastern Burma, Chinese logging has stripped mountains literally bare and Burma's military dictatorship has reaped the benefits. A community leader from Kachin claims military commanders sell the areas natural resources, while the local people benefit nothing.¹

A Watchful Eye

Global Witness is a U.K.-based non-governmental organization that exposes the links between the exploitation of conflict, corruption and human rights abuses. In 2005, China imported more than 1.5 million cubic meters of Burmese timber worth an estimated \$350 million (U.S.)—almost all of which were illegal, according to Global Witness.²

Global Witness contends that, following a decade of heavy logging by Chinese companies, China clamped down on illegal logging

Too much deforestation can lead to flooding.





in northern Burma by closing its border to timber trade and ordering Chinese workers to leave the country.

But the organization says timber continues to enter China via border back roads and questions whether the clamp-down signals a permanent change in policy, or merely an intermission.

So where is all this wood going? And how could the demand be so steep that Chinese companies are willing to turn to illegal logging operations for timber?

Last year, Forest Trends⁹ issued a report showing that the United States, Japan and the European Union are the primary markets for wood products from China. In fact, wood products bound for the United States and the European Union have increased almost 900 percent since 1998. Between 1997 and 2005, the value of forest products going into China rose from \$6.4 billion to \$16.4 billion and the actual volume tripled.

China's wood product companies say they have merely responded to growing consumer demand worldwide, as 70 percent of the country's imported timber is processed and then exported as furniture, plywood, wood mouldings, flooring and other wood products. Forest Trends' report concurs with Global Witness' claims stating: "In many supplier countries, particularly those with weak governance records, the increasing trade flows into China are associated with unsustainable harvesting, illegal logging and the abuse of forest communities' rights." But the report also indicates that China is only partly to blame and points out that responsibility also falls on retailers and, ultimately, consumers. "Consumers and retailers in the U.S., EU and Japan who buy Chinese furniture and plywood made from illegally harvested hardwoods from Papua New Guinea—to give just one example—are an integral part of the story," the

report says. It calls on international governments and the forest industry to increase transparency and accountability procedures, and to crack down on corruption and money laundering that drives illegal business. But the greatest pressure could end up coming from consumer choices. Just as health-conscious shoppers pick out foods labeled as organic in a grocery store, environment-conscious shoppers who are concerned about illegal deforestation can look for similar labels on building and home-improvement products.

'I Don't Know, I Just Sell This Stuff'

One of the simplest ways for consumers to ensure products aren't contributing to these problems is to look for and insist on certification labels.

"Companies that have been Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified make products whose chain of custody can be tracked from the retail store all the way back to the forest," explains Paul McRandle, deputy editor of *The Green Guide*, a web and print publication recently acquired by the National Geographic Society. "FSC certification ensures that trees were harvested in a responsible manner, emphasizing preservation of biodiversity and the watershed, as well as good labor practices and long-term management policies."

Keith D. Atherholt, president of Lewis Lumber Products in Picture Rocks, Pa., says his company got its FSC certification long before the general public even knew what that meant.

"There was absolutely no demand from a commercial standpoint. There was simply a communication void with the public. The general public thought forestry was forestry was forestry. And that's simply incorrect,"

Product certification programs verify the forests from which the products were cut.

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Atherholt says. His company, a lumber and millwork producer and retailer, became certified in 1998 and has a registration number in the double-digits to prove it.

"When you talk about law and illegal foresting, you have to realize that China has no law as we know it here. We make the assumption here in the United States that others see things the way we do. And they don't," he says.

"It would be a phenomenal eye-opener to Western cultures for people to see and realize how the Chinese have used and obliterated their natural resources. Their main concern is simply to make things and get them into a marketplace," Atherholt says, adding that the general public is light years behind in recognizing these issues, but is catching up.

"Back [in 1998] it was people, sitting in their Manhattan apartments, swirling a glass of wine, who would say, 'You know, I was at somebody's party the other night and they had the most beautiful hardwood floors and trim, and I'd just love to have that.' Yet they just cut a huge check to the Sierra Club for preservation," he says. "It was those types of people who had the money to buy high-end hardwood products, but were also concerned about the environment."

Hot Potato

While it's the responsibility of the manufacturers to source wood from responsible providers, pressured builders turn to their distributors and dealers for answers. When there's a discriminating client involved, having this information readily available could make or break the deal.

"People aren't willing to do the investigation necessary to ensure products are from wood that's been forested responsibly. That's where certifications like FSC come in, because people, more than anything else,

want their conscience[s] to be clean," Atherholt says.

"What happens quite frequently is, you'll have a consumer walk into a cabinetmaker's showroom, for example, and say, 'Hey, I want my cabinets in black cherry, but I want them FSC-certified.' If the cabinet maker says, 'Well, I'm not FSC-certified,' the consumer will say, 'That's okay, just get the wood from an FSC-certified dealer and show me the invoice.' So the cabinetmaker isn't certified, but the wood in the end product is and that's what consumers want," he explains.

Karen New, director of marketing for Alowood, agrees. "Certifications are that third-party endorsement a product carries that shows a customer our product is what we say it is and that allows them to feel good about their decision," she explains.

Alowood is produced by EverTech LLC in Ferndale, Wash., a joint venture between Chemco, also in Ferndale, and MeadWestvaco Specialty Chemicals, headquartered in Richmond, Va. The company says its treatment process uses a patented combination of vacuum and pressure injection technology that replaces air and moisture in the wood with an agriculturally grown additive. The end result is an entirely new product that the company says can serve as an alternative to endangered hardwoods at a reasonable price.

"Alowood is really for the end user that wants an exotic look at an affordable price, but it has the added feature of environmental friendliness that appeals to environmentally aware consumers," New says. "The stress we're placing on Evertech and Alowood stems from customers demanding it." She admits that a clean consumer conscience is part of the appeal. "We want them to feel good about their decision to use this product," she says.

Notes

1 Information taken from "Corruption Stains Timber Trade, Forests Destroyed in China's Race to Feed Global Wood-Processing Industry," by Peter S. Goodman and Peter Finn of the Washington Post Foreign Service. The Washington Post conducted a year-long investigation, reporting in China, Russia, Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, Singapore and the United States, interviewing government officers, diplomats, logging companies, traders, retailers, environmental scientists and advocates. The identities of many informants were kept anonymous, including those in Burma who brokered a logging deal with military commanders.

2 Global Witness' estimates are based on statistical information from the National Bureau of Statistics of China and China Customs, made available by the February 2006 edition of The World Trade Atlas.

3 Forest Trends, a consortium of industry and conservation groups, released the report, "China and the Global Market for Forest Products: Transforming Trade to Benefit Forests and Livelihoods." Based on five years of research by Forest Trends, the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the Center for Chinese Agricultural Policy (CCAP) and many other Chinese and regional organizations.

Waking Demand

Hancock Lumber, headquartered in Casco, Maine, has seen an increased demand in lumber for projects that specify FSC certification. The company has nine retail locations, three sawmills and a land division that manages more than 40,000 acres of sustainable forest land.

"We are seeing more of a demand for FSC-certified lumber for use in various state-funded projects here in Maine. We have also had an increased number of homeowners who are interested and builders who are working to get their projects LEED-certified," says Flannery Higgins, the company's marketing manager. "It is a matter of sustaining our business, but we're also seeing this grow as interest increases, so we've begun to focus on promoting it."

She says the company is working on segmenting its certified and green products, listing them separately for environmentally conscious customers, much like a grocery store would have a natural foods aisle. "From a consumer standpoint, I think it's much like the organic standard," Higgins says.

Greenlight Specials

The Home Depot has responded to consumer interest by recently launching Eco Options, a classification the company says allows its customers to identify products that have less of an impact on the environment. Of course, the big-box retailer also admits the launch will capitalize on the growing trend of consumers embracing environmentalism and seeking ways to protect the environment.

More than 2,500 Eco Options products have been identified and the company says it plans to expand this line continually.

In 1999, The Home Depot issued its first wood-purchasing policy, based on the company's pledge to give preference to wood from forests managed responsibly and to eliminate wood purchases from endangered regions of the world. The policy also calls for promoting and supporting the development and use of alternative environmental products, and encourages the company's vendors, and its suppliers of wood and wood products, to maintain compliance with laws and regulations pertaining to both operations and the products they manufacture.

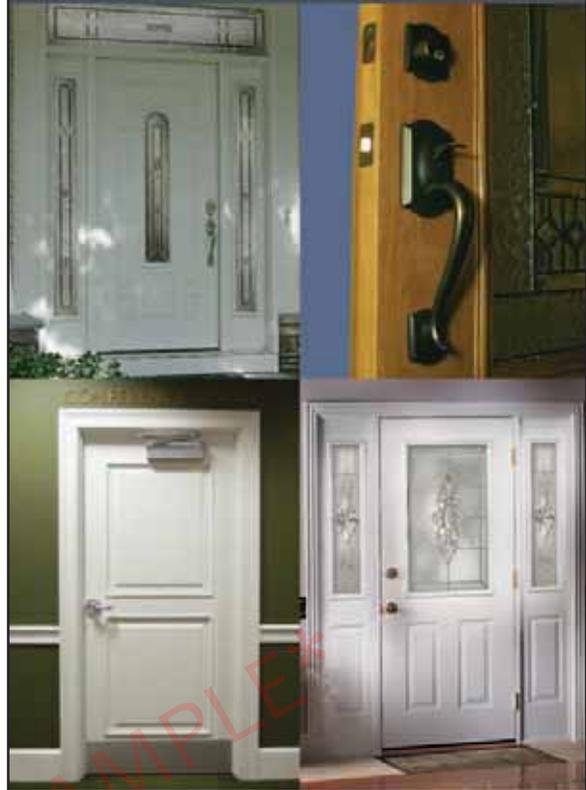
As the mindset of the consumer grows and changes with increased environmental awareness, the demand for product certification and labeling may increase. Designated areas, lists or catalogues, allow environmentally conscious customers to take for granted that the products within are "safe."

"In Canada we have an Eco Options catalogue. It's been out for a couple of years and has been successful," says Tony Wilbert, a public relations manager for The Home Depot.

Just as the scales have tipped for organic food customers, who were once outweighed by the expenses associated with a designated section of the supermarket, what was once known as "tree-hugging" may eventually become mainstream.

Perhaps it's a little early for an organic aisle in your showroom, but it may be time to prepare yourself by knowing the origin of your wood products. 

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