



Two Cases: *For and Against*

In August 1999, The Home Depot announced that by the end of 2002 the company would, according to President and CEO Arthur M. Blank, “eliminate from our stores wood from endangered areas ... and

give preference to ‘certified’ wood.” Not everyone agrees that this development should be viewed as good news. What is certified wood? Put simply, it means lumber and forest products that come with

Why I support forest certification

BY SCOTT LANDIS

Almost 30 years ago, when I was building a log cabin on the Bagaduce River in Maine, I stalked the moist, coastal forest in search of straight northern white cedar trees. Such specimens were hard to come by, even then, but that didn't prevent me from chopping them down when I found one that would make the grade. Later, when I was learning to make snowshoes in Ontario, I slogged through swamps in the boreal conifer forest hunting for a handful of black ash trees.

Woodworkers are unique among artisans in the direct, tactile re-

lationship they maintain between the living source of their material and the defining qualities of their finished products. Rare is the piece of furniture (or boat, or guitar) that does not reveal through its form, texture, grain, scent or color something of the life of the tree and, by extension, the forest from which its wood was drawn. There are plenty of practical reasons to be concerned about the erosion of our forest estate: the increasing cost and declining quality of lumber; the loss of vast tracts of ancient forest habitat; and the disappearance from the marketplace of wood species that



Certified Lumber

“chain-of-custody” documents that prove they have been judged to originate from sustainably managed forests. Who does the judging? For-profit (Scientific Certification Systems) and nonprofit (Smart

Wood) organizations. Certified lumber is a complicated issue, charged with passions from all sides of the political spectrum. What follows are two opinions on this issue by two longtime *Fine Woodworking* contributors.

Why certified wood will not save the rain forests

BY JON ARNO

When a noble cause falls into the hands of the inept, even though intentions are good, harm prevails. I can think of no clearer example of this than the current movement toward certification programs in the lumber industry.

That a real and present crisis exists with respect to preserving the world's remaining rain forests, there can be no doubt. While such forests originally accounted for more than a third of Earth's terrestrial biomass and were still virtually intact at the end of World War II, substantially less than half of them remain today. If our only goal

as conservationists was to preserve these pristine environments, that alone would be a noble cause, but the need to do so extends far beyond protecting the beauty of nature. These forests contain a disproportionately large number of the world's species of flora and fauna, representing a vital gene pool for future advancements in medicine and agriculture.

At the present time, less than 2% of these tropical species have been carefully analyzed for their pharmacological and commercial potential. If we squander this resource while we are mired at our

were once commonly available (Brazilian rosewood, Caribbean mahogany and Port-Orford cedar come immediately to mind). But, to me, the most compelling argument for expanding our notion of workmanship to include the quality of forest management is the emotional content of a stick of wood.

Until forest certification emerged in the last decade, there was no way for woodworkers or consumers to verify the provenance of their wood or to use the power of their purchases to support good forest management, unless they managed the trees themselves or happened to know the logger who felled them. Certification of forestry practices arose, in part, out of the bitter confrontations that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s between environmentalists dedicated to protecting old-growth forests from harvesting and members of the timber industry whose livelihoods depended on it. The Rainforest Action Network launched a boycott of tropical timber in 1987 in the hope of quelling fires then raging across the Amazon basin, which many people feared would lead to an incalculable loss of habitat and species. In 1993, during one of the largest acts of civil disobedience in Canadian history, more than a thousand forest activists were arrested at Clayoquot Sound on Vancouver Island for blocking the logging operations of MacMillan Bloedel Ltd.

Certification offered a middle path, a place where moderate environmentalists and responsible forest managers might find common ground. Bankrolled by private foundations and mainstream environmental groups, it was conceived as a tool for defining sustainable forest management and then recognizing its practitioners, so they might be rewarded in the marketplace with higher prices or stronger demand. (Privately, the concept was sold, in part, as an inoculation against protest.) As defined by the newly minted Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in 1993, lumber certification was all carrot and no stick. Because it would be voluntary and independent, it therefore distinguished itself from government regulation and the self-promoting claims of the industry.

The FSC went on to establish guidelines for good forest management, which are applied to regional and site-specific operating standards by FSC-accredited certifiers. (As of this writing, seven such agencies have certified almost 45 million acres around the world according to FSC criteria.) In its attention to such issues as biological diversity, riparian systems, the use of pesticides, clear-cutting, rare or endangered species, land tenure and fair labor practices, certification goes far beyond the “plant a tree for every tree cut” mantra that has characterized industry claims of sustainable forestry. As a tool for enhancing the scrutiny and transparency of forest practices, it is unprecedented.

Certification did not invent forest stewardship, and it is no panacea. It requires an up-front investment, which may be expensive

for small landowners, though costs have been mitigated by new group-certification programs and by efforts to certify forest managers rather than individual small properties. Thorny issues of poverty and injustice, which underlie much deforestation in the developing world, have not been addressed. Certification’s focus on good management does not identify forests that ought to be left alone, and it does not eliminate the need for regulation or the need

to curb our outsized appetite for wood. Perhaps most critically, the much-heralded “green market” for wood products from certified forests is only just emerging.

Despite these limitations, there are strong signs that certification is here to stay. The FSC model, which was ferociously attacked by many in the timber industry, has now helped shape several competing schemes. These include certification programs developed by the American Forest and Paper Association and the Canadian Standards Association. The World Bank and the World Wildlife Fund have committed to certify nearly 500 million acres worldwide by 2005. Perhaps most significant was last year’s pledge by The Home Depot to stop selling wood from environmentally sensitive areas and to give preference to certified wood. The Home Depot’s new policy has already resulted in a flurry of certification activity among major timber companies in Canada, where much of the company’s lumber originates. (MacMillan Bloedel Ltd., erstwhile nemesis of Greenpeace activists, vowed to phase out clear-

cut harvesting in British Columbia and applied for FSC certification of some of its holdings in 1998.)

When I walk through the woods, I will continue to stock my imagination with unbuilt projects for my shop. But I now see the forest as much more than a warehouse of raw materials to satisfy my industry. After several millennia of forest exploitation—from the Romans who plundered North Africa and Europe to our own forebears who mined the forests of New England, Wisconsin and the Pacific Northwest—certification may be the first real fulcrum with which to balance society’s narrow industrial needs against the broader values of forest ecosystems. Certification won’t solve all of our forest-management problems, but in less than a decade it has provided a framework to address some of the most important issues. Unlike our ancestors, we now know where the forest ends. Maybe we can yet learn how to make it last. □

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current level of scientific understanding, it is humanity's future that will be mortgaged.

The cause is just, but it is the proposed solution that we as concerned woodworkers need to examine with clarity. First of all, the proponents of lumber-certification programs have succeeded in promoting what amounts to a guilt trip among us, suggesting that the lumber industry and the wood users represent the central problem. This simply is not true. The cause for the decline in the world's tropical forests is the alarming increase in human population. Statistics provided by the World Wildlife Fund and the *Almanac of Science and Technology* agree that fully two-thirds of the exploitation of these forests results from their use as a source of fuel wood or from their wasteful removal to provide land for crops and pasture. Even the portion that is logged is not harvested strictly for export.

The truly tragic impact of these certification programs is that they will ultimately accelerate the alternative use of tropical forestlands at an appalling cost to the biodiversity of these regions around the globe. The countries where these forests are located have both a social and an economic imperative to feed their populations and to protect their fragile economies. If, by economic boycott of their old-growth timber, we render it worthless to them, they will destroy what they do not need for domestic consumption and quickly find alternative uses for the acreage. It is not that they or their governments are ignorant of the need to preserve this precious resource for all of humanity but rather their more imminent and desperate needs to feed their children and stave off economic destitution. In a like situation, we in the prosperous industrialized nations would react the same way, as indeed our 19th-century ancestors did when they cut and burned our vast Midwestern forests primarily to establish homestead farms.

By the measure of our past deeds, we clearly lack the moral right to dictate to other countries how they should manage their resources. However, beyond the issue of morality, we cannot forcefully impose our will on them, nor do we have the intelligence to do so wisely even if we could. The unadulterated truth is that our current understanding of forestry is too feeble. We don't know in detail exactly how rain forests work.

There are dozens, if not scores, of totally unique ecosystems in the tropics that we casually lump together under the generic heading of "rain forests." Each contains a separate community of species bound together in a precarious balance of symbiotic relationships that make them dependent upon each other for their survival. These species, many of them even yet to be formally classified, account for perhaps as much as 90% of all the terrestrial plant and animal species on earth. And we are being asked to believe that the self-appointed experts offering these certification

programs have the wisdom to dictate how these environments can be exploitatively managed. It is still uncertain whether we are currently managing our own far less complex temperate forests in a sustainable fashion. It is pure hokum for the proponents of these certification programs to suggest that they have the technical expertise to certify that their clients are operating on a sustainable-yield basis that preserves biodiversity. Under sustained exploitation, a rain forest quickly becomes a tropical plantation, and the two are not even remotely synonymous.

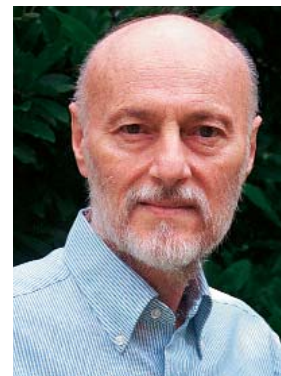
Basically, the game being played here is an extortion racket. The misguided leaders of this certification crusade have duped well-meaning woodworker-consumers into backing their cause and—on the strength of this support—are forcing Third World producers who own the timber to buy the right to market their own forest products on an export basis. Our domestic mass retailers are succumbing to the pressure because they perceive that it's what their customers want. And customer satisfaction is their second-highest priority, exceeded only by their desire to coin a profit. The added burden incurred by the Third World producers to pay for certification shows up as an increase in the retailers' cost-of-goods-sold, onto which the retailers apply their standard profit margins. In other words, the helpless producer simply passes the cost along, the retailers enjoy higher absolute profits, and we woodworkers end up paying for the warm, fuzzy feeling that

we've done our bit for conservation. The end result is that everybody is happy. Everybody, that is, except Mother Nature.

Our true conservation goal should be to preserve biodiversity. We must prevent exploitative intrusion of any kind into as much of the world's remaining rain forests as we can. Given the ongoing explosion in human population, it's unreasonable to assume that we can save them all, but we must save segments that are viably large enough to preserve the complex biodiversity that has evolved over millions of years. The only ethical way to do this demands taking title to the land or, at least, to the timber rights. In other words, we must compensate the Third World for retiring

these resources on our behalf. We cannot simply tell them to do so, because they do not have the means to unilaterally set them aside. Some conservation groups, such as The Nature Conservancy, have embarked on this correct strategy, but their efforts are woefully underfunded. □

Jon Arno, retired from his woodworking pursuits, spends his time writing mostly about underutilized domestic hardwoods.



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