



MEL EVANS/Associated Press
Georgina Shanley walks on the Ocean City boardwalk. She opposes using Brazilian wood on the boardwalk.

From Brazil to boardwalk: rain forest wood splinters community

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By WAYNE PARRY
The Associated Press

OCEAN CITY, N.J. (AP) — It looks good, lasts for decades and can support the weight of a police car or fire engine, not to mention thousands of people. For those reasons, wood from tropical rain forests has become a favorite with communities around the country who are either building or repairing boardwalks.

But the trend is upsetting environmentalists, who favor boardwalks made with synthetic materials or wood from trees that didn't grow in endangered areas.

And while this south Jersey beach town tried to do the right thing by seeking \$1.2 million worth of Brazilian wood certified as having been harvested responsibly, the flap that has arisen here highlights a fundamental question involving rain forests: Is there such a thing as "good" logging in places like the Amazon?

"Every second, 1.5 acres of rain forest is lost, and with it, thousands of plants and animals and habitat for the humans living there," said Georgina Shanley, a local environmentalist.

"The rain forest covers 60 percent of Brazil. It's the size of western Europe, and 20 percent of the rain forest has already been destroyed," she added. "It has a definite effect on global warming. What we are seeing with the rain forests is having a colossal negative impact on the planet."

But Ocean City says it needs Brazilian ipe hardwood for boardwalks that will bear the weight of its large summer crowds, support emergency vehicles and withstand the onslaught of moisture and salt from the ocean. The issue first arose here 10 years ago when Ocean City considered, then scrapped, an idea to use any more tropical rain forest wood on its 2 1/2-mile long boardwalk that was built out of a mixture of domestic yellow pine and ipe. The City Council passed a resolution in May 1997 declaring it would no longer purchase tropical rain forest hardwood for its boardwalk because it could not be sure it was harvested in an environmentally safe manner.

Now, however, the city is seeking wood from suppliers who have obtained certification from the Forest

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Stewardship Council, a group of industry and environmental groups who seek to improve forestry management practices. Certification means that loggers operate in ways designed to damage the ecosystem as little as possible, including not over-harvesting or wasting trees.

Scott Paul, a rain forest expert with Greenpeace, calls the certification “the Good Housekeeping seal of approval for forest management.” Greenpeace was one of the founding members of the forestry council, and supports its efforts to encourage more responsible logging.

But some environmentalists like Tim Keating, executive director of Rainforest Relief, a New York volunteer group that opposes the use of rain forest wood, said the forest council’s standards do nothing to ensure that rain forests can be sustained for future generations.

Katie Miller, a spokeswoman for the forestry council, said sustainability is a priority. “Part of it is to make sure these forests continue to grow,” she said.

Ocean City’s mayor, Sal Perillo, has either started or promised a number of green initiatives since taking office nine months ago. Those include the signing a pledge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, beginning a joint solar power project with the board of education, promising to convert some city vehicles to biodiesel fuel, and retrofitting buildings to use less energy.

He is bothered by the suggestion that Ocean City does not care about the environment.

“The option of having certified hardwood seems to make sense,” Perillo said. “We did some research and satisfied ourselves that was a satisfactory environmental policy. We believe we did the right thing.”

The city sought bids for 68,000 board-feet of ipe wood, which Shanley said is equivalent to 1,000 acres of rain forest. But it did not get any bids from vendors, who may have been confused about the complex specifications surrounding the request, said Jim Rutala, Ocean City’s business administrator.

It will try again soon, and hopes to have the wood delivered by the end of the summer for installation over the winter.

Keating said there are better alternatives to ipe, a flowering tree that towers over others in the forest canopy and can grow to 100 feet.

It is Brazil’s largest timber export, 50 percent of which is sold to customers in the United States. Ipe has been used in boardwalk projects from coast to coast, including Atlantic City, New York, Baltimore, Chicago, Miami Beach and Long Beach and Santa Monica, Calif.

“What I’m opposed to is the suggestion that the answer to bad logging is always better logging rather than no logging,” Keating said. “Is wood from far away always the answer?”

“Rain forests are only estimated to last another 35 or 40 years,” he added. “That is a major, major problem. We can’t keep doing this.”

Shanley, the Ocean City environmentalist, said her community would be endangering its very survival by using rain forest wood for its boardwalk.

“Ocean City is a very vulnerable barrier island,” she said. “By us taking 1,000 acres of rain forest now, we’re becoming part of global warming and rising seas. We’re actually making our own island vulnerable to flooding in future years. It’s very shortsighted.”

Both sides in the Ocean City debate have sought advice from Paul, the Greenpeace rain forest expert.

“There is logic on both sides,” he said. “The local environmentalists are 100 percent right that they should exhaust every other available option. But if Ocean City has exhausted those options and says it has to have ipe for its load-bearing capacity or other criteria, then they should be commended for seeking FSC-certified wood and paying extra for it. That is the most responsible choice under the circumstances.”

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