



Plywood with a pedigree

Certification of lumber seeks to educate loggers, consumers

By Charles Hodson



A worker prepares to cut down a hundred-year-old Miranti tree

KALIMANTAN, Indonesia (CNNfn) — Indonesia accounts for 10 percent of the world's remaining tropical forests, **which are home to more mammal species than anyplace else on Earth.** But the forests, including those in Kalimantan province on the island of Borneo, also represent a critical economic resource for a country that needs the money.

Powerful lathes peel Indonesia's trees down to thin veneers that are glued together to form plywood, which is exported for use in construction. Indonesia was the world's leading exporter of plywood in 1996, at a total of nearly \$4 billion, before southern Asia

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was beset by an economic crisis and rampant forest fires; in 1999, at \$2.4 billion, it was second only to Canada.

But environmentalists say Indonesia's remaining 70 to 80 million hectares [175 million to 200 million acres] of rain forest — an area almost the size of Austria — is rapidly being depleted by logging, threatening sensitive and unique ecosystems.

“The deforestation rate right now is alarming,” says Agus Purnomo, executive director of the World Wildlife Fund in Indonesia. **“It is the largest ever recorded in the history. We are now, I believe, having 2 million hectares deforestation rate per year.”**

The loss of habitat for such endangered species as the orangutan and Sumatran tiger in Indonesia and other threatened areas has been stirring public concern.

Since its creation in 1993, the Forest Stewardship Council, a non-profit organization based in Oaxaca, Mexico, has signed on environmental and human rights groups and timber buyers and suppliers in support of timber certification.

“Now, for the first time,” FSC Director Timothy Synnott says, “we and, of course, any other organizations and dealers and traders can say, ‘If you want to buy a forest product which is not contributing to forest destruction, which is not contributing to human rights abuses, maltreatment of workers and of indigenous people, look for products that come from certified forests.’”



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The FSC logo lets consumers know the lumber came from a certified forest

The sustainable forestry movement has gained enough momentum that some logging companies in nations like Indonesia find it worth their while to seek certification. “We are exporting our products... 35 percent to 40 percent to the U.S.A. and like 20 percent to Europe,” says Indra Bakrie, chairman of Indonesian timber company Austral Byna. “This U.S. and Europe, they are very much concerned about this issue so if we don't follow the rule of the game we'll be out of the business.”

Deep in Kalimantan, past acres where trees have been harvested and underbrush burned back, Austral Byna is logging government-licensed forests at the edge of the virgin rain forest. A hundred-year-old Meranti tree falls to a forester's chain saw. For some environmentalists, it is a sad sight; but it falls within both the government's guidelines and the FSC's standards for sustainability.

“This tree is cut down because it is a mature tree,” Austral Byna CEO Jose Duplito Jr. says. “The government allows us to cut trees with diameter at breast height of 50 and up centimeters.”

The Sumatran tiger, one of the five surviving tiger subspecies, is found only on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, where most of its rain forest habitat has been cleared for agriculture. Authorities estimate that there are only 400 Sumatran tigers living in the wild, and another 210 in zoos.



Once found throughout Southeast Asia, the orangutan (from Malaysian for "man of the forest") is now only found in Borneo and a small part of Sumatra. In addition to the disappearance of their habitat, orangutans are threatened by poaching for meat, souvenirs or pets.

But, Duplito says, the government has cracked down on clear-cutting. “The government would only allow us to cut 56 percent of the total volume in a forest compartment,” he says. And though the Austral Byna lumber camp is far from the nearest town with no government inspectors present, Duplito says there is little chance to break the rules: “You have district foresters who quite visit our company once a month to take a look at what we are doing.”

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On land that has been logged, a rice crop grows — but only for one season. Wood is the real cash crop. Close to the rice, saplings from the rain forest species *Gmelina Arboria* are planted every three meters [10 feet]. In 12 years, these saplings are expected to be 15 meters [49 feet] tall; then, they can be harvested to make furniture, decreasing demand for trees from the rain forest.

At the British building supply chain B&Q, like its American counterpart The Home Depot, concern over public image has made certified lumber ever more attractive. Virtually all wood products on B&Q's shelves today are FSC-certified, and The Home Depot has committed to eliminating from its shelves uncertified wood products from "environmentally sensitive" areas by 2002.

“We weren’t losing customers, but what we did know that it would take a lot of hard work to sort this issue out,” says Alan Knight, B&Q’s head of sustainability. “We also knew that we weren’t ever going to have customers demanding sustainable timber in our stores, but we knew that if our name, B&Q, was associated with the destruction of tropical forest, or even temperate forest, that our brand name would be damaged.”

In addition to the environmental concerns, one of the goals of lumber certification is to ensure that people in the areas being logged share in the economic benefits. Austral Byna says its logging operation pays better than average wages, provides schools in the communities where it is active, runs a health clinic and is building a mosque. “All activities, forest activities, should have a positive impact on the long-term social and economic well-being of the community,” Duplito says.

But of 20 major lumber companies in Indonesia, Austral Byna is one of only three to seek certification. Other companies market their products in east Asian countries, where sustainable forestry is not a major concern. And, environmentalists say, at least half of all the lumber in Malaysia is illegally cut.

SmartWood, an organization that carries out certification for the FSC, says that the process is rigorous, fair and effective. “It connects a consumer... all the way back to a forest that's been well managed,” Jeff Hayward, SmartWood’s Asia-Pacific regional manager, says. “And by building that linkage, that’s the positive side of globalization.”

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But The Home Depot says there are two practical problems with insisting on certified products. At this point, only 5 percent of the world's timber is FSC-certified, so it's difficult to stock the vast shelves of a building supply warehouse with only those products. And consumers, by and large, are unaware of the issue and don't show much of a preference for certified products.



“We want to educate consumers about FSC and certification and the value of buying an FSC-certified product,” says The Home Depot vice president Suzanne Apple. “But with the limited number of products in the marketplace, we have to get the products on the shelves so that we can then educate the consumers in their choices.”

Convincing suppliers to abide by a set of certification principles is likely to be a non-starter unless consumers demand it. That shifts the fight over sustainability to a new battlefield — one marked by the sounds of price checks and forklifts rather than chain saws and logging trucks.

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