

STEALING HOME

THE OLD GROWTH RAINFORESTS *of The Home Depot*

Tim Keating
with Kim Mizrahi

D R A F T

3rd in the *Rainforest Relief Reports* Series of Occasional
Papers
October 1997

R A I N F O R E S T R E L I E F

Sparing the World's Rainforests from Consumption

New York, NY: phone: 917/543-4064 Portland, OR 503/236-3031

info@rainforestrelief.org www.rainforestrelief.org

122 W. 27th Street, 10th Floor • New York, NY 10001

Printed on Recycled or Salvaged Paper

Based in Atlanta, Georgia, The Home Depot has become the largest “lumber yard” in the United States, claiming over 12% of the U.S. “home improvement” market alone. However, its meteoric rise in sales has not been without costs. Home Depot has become the largest single retailer of old growth rainforest wood and wood products on Earth.

The Elimination of Rainforests

Although the values and benefits of rainforests are well documented, they continue to be eliminated at an *ever-increasing* pace. Conversion to cash crops such as beef, bananas, coffee and cacao and logging, mining and oil drilling continue to destroy these vital and fragile forests. Among those most responsible is the rainforest timber trade. Logging is the greatest factor in the loss of rainforests as new roads provide access and lead to clearing. Due to this loss, *each day, hundreds* of species of rare plants, animals, insects and small organisms become extinct, *being driven forever from the Earth* by human ignorance and greed.

Rainforest destruction contributes 25 – 35 % of global warming gases to the atmosphere, thus adding substantially to the warming of the Earth.

Numerous cures for human ailments have been discovered in rainforests, and more are being researched right now. However, we have already lost one potential cure for aids to rapacious logging for plywood production in Malaysia.

Temperate zone rainforests are also highly endangered. One of the rarest ecosystems on Earth, temperate rainforest are being clearcut into oblivion, replaced by tree farms. These incredibly rich habitats for bears, salmon and thousands of other species, are being eliminated for timber.

The loss of rainforest is the greatest catastrophe in the Earth’s and human history, and it is *preventable*.

The Role of Logging

The demand for rainforest woods is spurring illegal and unsustainable logging operations that degrade and destroy these fragile ecosystems and threaten the livelihood of indigenous peoples. Indians have even been killed by loggers seeking timber.

Tropical rainforest hardwoods are imported into the U.S. as plywood, veneers or paneling; lumber; or as finished items such as furniture, doors, moldings, picture frames, flooring and more.

The United States is the second largest importer of tropical rainforest hardwoods. Is it worth the loss of these essential forests so we can save \$6 on a sheet of plywood?

Temperate rainforests are being clearcut logged for interior paneling, exterior siding, two-by-fours, plywood and hot tubs.

What Types of Rainforest Wood Does Home Depot Sell?

Home Depot sells a broad range of rainforests woods including:

Lauan

Also called luan, meranti or Philippine Mahogany, lauan is the term that is now used to denote any tropical hardwood plywood. Actual lauan trees are native to the former rainforests of the Philippines, but have become nearly commercially extinct. Most tropical plywood now comes from the shrinking (and burning) rainforests of Indonesia and Malaysia and is sometimes called meranti. All tropical plywood may be composed of any one or more of hundreds of different species, all lumped into the same product, called either lauan, meranti or Philippine mahogany. These woods have no relation to mahogany at all (the name was thought up by the US Forest Service to sell more plywood from the Philippines). Tropical plywood is the most commonly imported tropical hardwood, entering the U.S. as plywood sheets, veneers, door skins and in furniture. Plywood makes up 80% of U.S. tropical hardwood imports. Lauan or meranti is poor- to medium-quality wood with a range of color from red to near white.

Lauan is highly undervalued, as Asian logging firms have cleared through millions of hectares of rainforest since the 1950s. The Philippines, once the largest exporter, is now over 80% deforested and is now a net wood importer. Thailand, once a large producer, is also 80% deforested and is also a net wood importer. Malaysia and Indonesia, both recent top exporters of tropical plywood, have each lost half their forests to logging and consequent deforestation.

Indigenous peoples in each of these countries have attempted to stand in the way of the slaughter of their forests, but to little avail. In Malaysia, the army has beaten and arrested many indigenous Penan as they have attempted to block the ravaging of their homelands by Japanese logging firms and the Malaysian government.

In the Philippines, activists have been targeted for assassination by illegal loggers seeking to cut the few remaining lauan trees on private lands.

Undervalued and sold very cheaply, the real cost of lauan is extremely high.

Home Depot sells lauan plywood in the form of all-lauan plywood sheets of varying thicknesses (in the L.A. store, distributed by La Mirada DC/Taraga Pacific; in New Jersey distributed by Furman Lumber), interior hollow-core doors (made by Premdor, Canada), lauan-faced softwood plywood sheets (Roseburg Forest Products), and paneling (Georgia Pacific).

Home Depot sells solid lauan (or other related species of Southeast Asian rainforest hardwoods in the *Shorea* genus) in other products (such as the handles on the Sunbeam Grillmaster outdoor gas grill; handles from Malaysia on True Temper wheelbarrows and sold separately; and the wooden part of the Marshalltown wood floats).

Mahogany

A beautiful dark wood with a reddish color and fine grain, the majority of mahogany on the market today is taken illegally from rainforests in Brazil and Bolivia. Outlaw timber companies invade indigenous reserves, park and nature preserves destroying not only the fragile forests, but the homelands of indigenous tribal peoples. Tree poachers punch new roads into pristine forests, cut valuable trees, transport the wood to middlemen and exporters who in turn sell it to importers in the U.S., Europe and Japan. The U.S. is the world's leading importer of mahogany.

At least eight indigenous Amazonian tribes have had members murdered at the hands of mahogany loggers, prompting the campaign cry, "Mahogany is Murder".

Smaller volumes of mahogany are imported from Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Belize, Guatemala and a few other Central and South American rainforest countries.

The Brazilian intelligence agency has reported that 80% of logging in Brazil is illegal. Eduardo Martins, the head of the Brazilian environment agency (IBAMA), has been quoted on at least two occasions stating that the 80% figure is correct and that the agency would need four times its current budget to properly enforce illegal logging.

Two agencies in Brazil have declared South American mahogany within Brazil (the largest part of its range) to be endangered.

Caribbean (true) mahogany is commercially extinct from its native areas in the West Indies, driven to near extinction by overlogging to feed the British demand for mahogany in fine furniture.

When we buy mahogany doors, paneling or furniture, we participate in driving forests, endangered species and human cultures into extinction.

The Home Depot sells pre-hung doors made from South American (bigleaf) mahogany. Two wholesale companies are known to sell to The Home Depot, Main Door Corporation of Gardena, CA and Royal Mahogany.

Main Door uses mahogany and other species incorrectly labeled as mahogany. The label on these doors states that "No Endangerous Species [sic]" are used.

Royal Mahogany is certified by Scientific Certification Systems as using wood from an independently certified source (Portico). However, on the label of boxes, the Royal statement states that "50%" of the materials for their doors come from Portico. That means that the other 50% are from uncertified sources.

Mahogany can also be found in the Brass Bound Hardwood Level from Johnson Level & Tool.

Ramin

Ramin is a blond-colored hardwood native to swamp rainforests of the island of Borneo (Malaysia and Indonesia). These forests have been hammered by loggers since the early 1980s and are nearing extinction. Even though ramin is considered endangered, it is being logged at ever-increasing rates, as it is considered highly valuable. Ramin is used extensively for furniture, dowels, tool handles, and other small items like drying racks.

Buying ramin or ramin-containing items perpetuates a demand that keeps the value of this tree high, thus continuing to encourage the illegal logging of this endangered species.

Home Depot sells ramin as dowels and as handles for tools manufactured in Southeast Asia (usually Indonesia, Thailand or Taiwan) and the U.S. The handles in the Wall Covering Kit, the Barrel Seam Roller and the Smoother Brush, all from Padco (Thailand) are ramin. The Three Piece Extension Handle, Foam Brushes, Top Coater and other paintbrushes and painting products distributed by Linzer are all made from ramin or other old growth Southeast Asian hardwoods. The Wire Scratch Brush and other similar tools are from Great American Manufacturing, Inc. of Sun Valley, CA, made in Taiwan. The Weber Grill Brush is ramin. Most mops and brooms and the Professional Squeegee made by Quickie Manufacturing have ramin handles. Most of the Rubbermaid mops have ramin handles. Many Ames rakes, such as the Kodiak, have ramin handles, used indiscriminately with pine. And, ironically, the flagpole distributed by Seasonal Design, Inc. is made in Indonesia of ramin.

Cedar

Native to temperate rainforests of the Pacific Northwest from northern California to Alaska, cedar trees are one of the oldest forms of life in the Pacific coastal temperate rainforests (and on Earth).

Cedar trees often reach over 800 years old, with trees over 1,000 year old not uncommon. There are three species commonly used, Western Red Cedar, yellow cedar and Alaskan cedar. Other cedars are used as well, such as white cedar, Eastern red cedar (knotty cedar) and incense cedar, but these are usually not old growth. However, some of the white cedar may contain old growth.

Western cedars are highly rot-resistant softwoods (cone-bearing trees) and have been used for thousands of years by native peoples in the Northwest for longhouse construction, racks, baskets, boats and totems. Out of respect for these “grandfathers of the forest”, when some natives cut a cedar tree, they would turn away as it fell to allow the spirit of the tree to escape back into the forest.

More recently, cedar has come into favor for boardwalks, decks, exterior shingles, interior paneling, planter boxes, play sets, fencing, animal bedding and mulch, and is being cut indiscriminately everywhere it is found.

Most western cedar sold in the U.S. is originating from British Columbia’s rainforests, as large cedars have been virtually eliminated from the northwest U.S. Ninety-eight percent of logging in B.C. is in old-growth forests, so all B.C. wood products should be avoided unless they come from independently certified operations.

When we lose old-growth western cedars, we lose one of the most ancient members of the coastal rainforest. It is shameful to use these massive giants for frivolous things such as gerbil bedding.

Home Depot sells western red cedar as interior tongue-and-groove planking (Macmillan Bloedel), exterior shingles, shims and garden trellises (Lattice Top Gate, Universal Forest). White cedar is sold as shingles (Pabaced GDS), garden planter barrels (Irving Forest Products, Maine) and garden fencing.

Redwood

Attaining a height of 280 feet, redwoods are the true giants of the west. Native and endemic (that is, found nowhere else) to northern California, Redwoods are a *softwood* (cone-bearing tree) with a red-colored heartwood that is highly rot-resistant.

Old growth redwoods have been logged to near oblivion in their entire range. Only 3% of the original old-growth redwoods remain.

Recently, the Maxxam Corporation purchased Pacific Lumber, a family-owned lumber operation that had been logging selectively and fairly sustainably on their lands for generations. Included on their privately owned lands were 65,000 acres of old-growth redwood groves.

In a hostile takeover, Maxxam obtained controlling interest in the company and began to liquidate its assets to pay off junk bond debt accrued in the late 1980s. Those assets include the redwoods.

Home Depot sells redwood dimensional lumber as 2x4s and planking in a variety of dimensions from Pacific Lumber and also as redwood planter boxes (Matthews).

Douglas Fir

This blond-colored softwood is native to the temperate rainforests of North America.

While much of the replanting of clearcut western forests has been done using Douglas fir, old growth ‘Doug’ firs are still being logged in the U.S. and Canada. Because mills will accept old growth trees along with second growth (most actually prefer old growth), it is difficult to specify companies or products. However, one can often differentiate old growth from second growth (replanted) by observing the grain. Old growth trees usually have a very tight (less than a millimeter width) grain.

Grain is lines or patterns in wood usually caused by seasonal variations in growth. Also called “rings” one can tell how fast a tree grew by how far apart each ring is from the next. Tight rings mean slow growth, wide rings mean faster growth.

In old growth forests, among competing trees and varying light and other conditions, trees usually grow much more slowly than they do in an artificial replanted situation.

A second growth Douglas Fir may get as large at 40 years as a 100 year old tree would be in a natural old growth forest situation.

Home Depot sells Douglas Fir with observed old growth grain as exterior entry doors (Morgan Northwoods Door and Northstar) and as dimensional lumber (2x6s, 2x8s, 2x10s) from Weyerhaeuser (old growth observed in Secaucus, NJ).

2x4s and Softwood Plywood

Much of the wood being consumed in the U.S. actually comes from Canada, with a substantial portion coming from the West coast province of British Columbia (BC).

BC currently holds about half of North America’s coastal temperate rainforests, an ecosystem type that once extended from northern California to Alaska. The vast majority of the coastal temperate rainforests in California, Oregon and Washington have been logged to oblivion and those in Alaska and B.C. are under heavy pressure from the timber industry.

Thirty to 40% of U.S. 2x4s come from British Columbia (mostly coastal rainforests) and a similar percentage of plywood. As stated above, 98% of logging in B.C. is clearcutting of old growth forests.

While it is at this time impossible to say *which* 2x4s are from B.C., one should note the large percentage that are and act accordingly.

Home Depot and Rainforests

Tragically, Home Depot and other home improvement centers sell large quantities of tropical and temperate rainforest wood and rainforest wood-containing products.

What type of rainforest wood have you bought from Home Depot and put in your home?

What Should I Do?

As alternatives to buying rainforest wood from Home Depot, consider not doing that “improvement” at all. Americans need to seriously question the demands we place on the Earth for frivolous things such as decks.

When it comes to tools that will be used infrequently, consider borrowing them from neighbors. Organize a tool co-op in your neighborhood for infrequently used tools.

If you must own tools, buy them used at flea markets, garage or yard sales and thrift stores.

As an alternative to wood lumber, consider recycled plastic lumber* (for poles, decks, garden ties, fencing or trellises) or other recycled materials (such as steel).

If you must buy products containing wood, buy only salvaged woods, certified well-managed woods* or, as a last resort, domestic second growth.

For more information about Home Depot’s rainforest wood products, further information on recycled plastic lumber, salvaged wood or wood from independently certified operations, contact us.

Rainforest Relief
917/543-4064 (New York)
503/236-3031 (Portland, OR)
info@rainforestrelief.org
122 W. 27th Street, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10001

Rainforest Relief, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, works to spare rainforests from overconsumption through education and campaigns that reduce the use of products and materials derived from rainforest destruction, such as tropical hardwoods, temperate rainforest softwoods; petroleum; metals; and agricultural products such as bananas, coffee, chocolate and sugar.