



Unchecked and Illegal Logging in Olancho, Honduras

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Know the Forest and the Trees: A Consumer's Guide to Buying Wood

Whether you are building a deck or just buying a nightstand, your purchase can have an impact on forests and people thousands of miles away. Your money could support a sustainable community initiative on the rainforest's edge—or it could contribute to continued impoverishment of families in Latin America or deforestation in Southeast Asia. The only way to know the difference is to ask. By asking, you show retailers that the answers matter to you as a consumer. And by purchasing legally and sustainably harvested wood—or by choosing recycled or composite alternatives—you help turn the market against destructive and unsustainable business practices.

When Buying Wood, Choose Wisely

If you do decide to use a traditional wood product, look for the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) logo—a good indicator that the wood came from a well-managed forest. While no verification system is perfect, FSC-certified wood represents best practices, including the use of reduced-impact logging techniques that mitigate collateral damages and increase efficiency. The FSC also promotes systems to track wood from the forest to the consumer, helping to distinguish products that were legally harvested from those that were not.

Consider Wood Alternatives

Depending on your application, there are a number of alternative materials available, including reclaimed or salvaged woods, recycled plastic lumber, and composites. Buying recycled materials prevents unnecessary logging in tropical forests, reduces the emission of global warming pollutants, and provides incentives for municipal recycling programs.

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Four Questions to Ask Before Buying

If your local retailers don't know this basic information about their wood products, ask them to find out.

1. Where is the wood from?

For both consumers and companies, knowing the source of wood products is the first step in making good purchasing choices. At a minimum, retailers should know what country the wood came from—not just where it was processed. Ideally, they will also know the region within the country and what timber company harvested it.

2. What species is the wood? (e.g. Teak, Ipê, "Philippine" or "Honduran" Mahogany)

Slow-growing hardwood tree species are often more endangered than fast-growing softwood species (see table). A tree's origin also matters. For example, plantation teak from Central America or Indonesia is lower risk than teak from the forests of Myanmar.

3. Is the wood certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)?

FSC certification is your best assurance that the wood you are buying is from a legal and sustainably managed forest. You can also ask about the specific type of FSC certification given to the wood, e.g., 100 percent, recycled, or mixed-sources.

4. If the wood is not FSC certified, how can I know it was legally or sustainably logged?

Some certification labels on the international market are not rigorous or independently evaluated. Retailers may also have their own internal systems to ensure that they are selling legal products. Let suppliers know through your questions that you care about how these systems work.

Tropical Hardwoods



BIG-LEAF MAHOGANY

AKA: Honduran or American mahogany, *Swietenia macrophylla*

ORIGIN: Mexico, Central & South American tropical forests

QUALITIES: Rich orange to reddish-brown colors, fine grains, dimensionally stable, highly workable, durable

USES: High-quality furniture, interior finishing, artisanry, boat building, veneer

STATUS: Like all timbers shown here, overexploited wherever it occurs & facing extensive habitat loss; on CITES Appendix II since 2002*; associated with forced labor and human rights violations in Latin America

NOTE: Most current old-growth supply is from Peru, where illegal & unsustainable logging continues; Fijian plantation supplies are also available



SPANISH CEDAR

AKA: Central American cedar, cedro, *Cedrela odorata*, *C. fissilis*

ORIGIN: Mexico, Central & South American tropical forests

QUALITIES: Pink to salmon-red, less dense than big-leaf mahogany, stable, strong, durable, aromatic

USES: Furniture, cabinetry, cigar boxes, musical instruments, construction

STATUS: Considered threatened by logging & habitat loss throughout its range; unsuccessfully proposed for CITES Appendix II in 2007*; often associated with destructive mahogany extraction

NOTE: All species in *Cedrela* look very similar and are considered threatened



CARIBBEAN PINE

AKA: Honduran pine, Nicaraguan pitch pine, ocote, *Pinus oocarpa*, *P. caribea*

ORIGIN: Central American highland forests, esp. Honduras

QUALITIES: A light, long-fibered wood easily sawn & worked

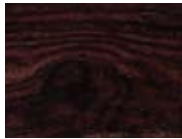
USES: Lightweight construction, broom handles, crates, telephone poles & posts, paper

STATUS: Remaining natural stands are threatened by overexploitation & illegal logging in protected areas; in Honduras, conflict over illegal pine logging has led to ongoing human rights violations

NOTE: Wood difficult to distinguish from other commercial species in genus (e.g., Southern Yellow Pine)

Wood is an environmentally sound and renewable resource when managed properly. However, tropical hardwoods like those described in the table are difficult to manage sustainably, because they typically grow at

low densities in natural forests and regenerate poorly after logging. These high-value species are the object of some of the most damaging illegal logging activities in the countries where they occur.



IPÊ

ROSEWOOD

TEAK

RAMIN

MERBAU

AFRICAN MAHOGANY

OKOUMÉ

AKA: Roble, pau d'arco, ironwood, *Tabebuia rosea*, *T. impetiginosa*, *T. serratifolia*

AKA: Cocobolo, palisandro, *Dalbergia* spp.

AKA: Teca, *Tectona grandis*

AKA: *Gonystylus bancanus*, *Gonystylus* spp.

AKA: Kwila, Ipil, *Intsia bijuga*, *I. palembanica*

AKA: Sapele, sipo, utile, *Entandrophragma* spp., *Khaya* spp.

AKA: Gabon, *Aucoumea klaineana*

ORIGIN: Central & South American tropical forests

ORIGIN: American, African & Asian dry tropical forests

ORIGIN: Southeast Asia esp. India, Myanmar & Thailand

ORIGIN: Southeast Asian peat swamps & lowland forests, esp. Indonesia & Malaysia

ORIGIN: Southeast Asian & Pacific Islands coastal & mangrove forests

ORIGIN: African tropical forests from Guinea to Angola

ORIGIN: African equatorial forests esp. Gabon & Guinea

QUALITIES: Dark green or brown wood is extremely dense, durable & weather resistant

QUALITIES: Highly patterned dark red heartwood, dense, strong & durable

QUALITIES: Dense golden-brown wood, dimensionally stable, highly workable, durable, insect & weather resistant

QUALITIES: Pale blonde color, fine-grained, highly workable, tensile strength excellent for long narrow pieces, aromatic

QUALITIES: Red-brown wood, gold-flecked grain, extremely durable & decay-resistant

QUALITIES: Pink to reddish-brown, fine grains, durable, similar working qualities to big-leaf mahogany

QUALITIES: Lightweight reddish wood easily impregnated, seasoned & worked

USES: Residential decking, heavy construction, railroad ties, fence posts

USES: Artisanal carving, inlay work, musical instruments, tool & cutlery handles

USES: High-quality furniture, interior finishing, decking, ship building, veneer

USES: Baby cribs, picture frames, tool handles, pool cues, joinery, moldings, flooring

USES: Flooring, joinery, posts, beams, furniture, musical instruments

USES: High-quality furniture, interior finishing, boat building, artistry, veneer

USES: Furniture, interior finishing, cabinetry, cigar boxes, veneer, plywood

STATUS: Heavily exploited in the Amazon to supply decking market as substitute for dwindling big-leaf mahogany supplies

STATUS: Considered threatened by logging wherever it occurs; unsuccessfully proposed for CITES Appendix II in 2007*

STATUS: Centuries of commercial logging & land clearing have sharply reduced habitat; most natural forest teak traded internationally is from Myanmar, where its trade has helped to fund the military junta

STATUS: Heavily logged in vulnerable peat swamps & protected areas, especially prime endangered orangutan habitat; on CITES Appendix II since 2002*

STATUS: Few natural stands survive, currently under review for CITES protection; in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, the object of large-scale illegal logging and exploitation of communities

STATUS: Heavily logged throughout their natural ranges, species in this group face widespread commercial depletion

STATUS: Limited range & heavy exploitation, esp. in Gabon, mean that supplies are considered under threat

NOTE: Ipê's life history – slow-growing, with scarce regeneration – makes it extremely vulnerable to logging

NOTE: *Dalbergia* is a large group of similar species occurring at extremely low densities in natural forests

NOTE: Extensive plantations in Indonesia and Central & South America provide FSC-certified supply

NOTE: Six of 30 *Gonystylus* species are widely traded & considered threatened, esp. *G. bancanus*

NOTE: Reports suggest that large volumes will be used in construction of 2008 Olympic facilities in Beijing

NOTE: In the same botanical family (Meliaceae) as big-leaf mahogany, Spanish cedar & high-value Southeast Asian mahoganies

NOTE: Extensive plantations have been established outside okoumé's range in Cameroon, Ghana, Madagascar, and Guyana

* The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) was established to protect plant and animal species from overharvesting for trade. Species included in Appendix II are considered endangered, and their legal trade is supposed to be restricted to scientifically determined sustainable quotas in their native countries.

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Thinking Beyond Your Own Wallet

Making informed and responsible choices when purchasing wood for your own use is one of the most important things you can do to combat illegal logging. As a member of a larger group, however, you have the potential to create an even greater impact. Begin by investigating the procurement policies of your office, school, house of worship, or community organization. Then educate others about the importance of spending the organization's funds on purchases that support sustainable business practices, healthy forests, and the people who live and work around them.

From Boardwalks to Borders

Policymakers at all levels of government have an important role to play in protecting tropical forests. Local governments are major purchasers of wood and the policies they adopt can become a benchmark for policies at the national and international level. Some cities already have purchasing policies that give preference to FSC-certified wood or recycled alternatives—and many more are following suit.

At the national level, Congress is considering legislation to prohibit the import of illegally harvested wood and has begun to require controls on the illegal timber trade as part of U.S. bilateral trade agreements. The next step is for the United States to lead efforts to establish an international agreement prohibiting the cross-border trade of illegally logged wood.



Online Resources

To learn more about wood certification, visit:

- The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) at www.fsc.org
- NRDC's "Good Wood" guide at www.nrdc.org/land/forests/qcert.asp

To learn more about alternatives to tropical woods, including building specifications and sources, visit:

- The California Integrated Waste Management Board at www.ciwmb.ca.gov/plastic/recycled/lumber
- Rainforest Relief at www.rainforestrelief.org/documents/Guidelines.pdf

To learn more about destructive illegal logging, and what's being done to combat it, visit:

- The Environmental Investigation Agency at www.eia-global.org/forests.html
- NRDC's BioGems site at www.savebiogems.org/tahuamanu