

Responsible wood use

Sasha Bosbeer advocates the use of certified timber as evidence of responsible forest management

Many aspects of our lives here in Ireland depend on the natural resources from other parts of the world. We get out-of-season strawberries from Chile and cut flowers from Kenya. We also import a lot of wood and paper products –271 million dollars worth in 2001, which nearly doubled to over half a billion dollars worth by 2005, according to the International Trade Center. In some cases, we are buying timber which is being harvested in a way that damages the ecology, water quality, species diversity, aesthetics, and other important aspects of the quality of life of other people. The best way to prevent contributing to environmental degradation is to ensure the timber, paper, and other wood products we are using are independently certified by an organisation such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as being from well-managed forests.

The beauty of wood

Everybody is talking about carbon and carbon footprints these days. Timber is being increasingly recognised as a carbon-neutral material for building, furniture, and fuel, as any carbon released as the wood decays or burns was absorbed by the tree when it was growing. The new trees planted in well-managed forests, growing to be future houses, chairs, and cooking fires, are absorbing carbon again in a natural cycle.

And there are plenty of other reasons to use timber, such as its simple beauty (I may be biased, but I am sure many people agree). There is also the joy of using a natural material. But our demand means that there are enormous amounts of wood and pulp being imported into Ireland from Europe, and from tropical countries in Africa and South America. This is a worry, given both the fuel burned to bring the timber to Ireland and the potential that the harvesting of the exported timber may be ruining people's livelihoods in these distant countries.

Tropical deforestation

Forests are overused in many parts of the world, for all sorts of reasons, and the result often damages the lives of the local people,



There are two main sources of the additional carbon in our global atmosphere. One of the sources is burning fossil fuels, and the other is loss of tropical forests. This means that buying a nice wooden product from tropical wood

especially the rural poor. Water supplies may trickle away, or mud slides bury villages or fields; traditional medicinal herbs may disappear along with forests and birds, or the de-vegetated old tropical soil may not be fertile enough to support new plants. Species may be lost through conversion of forest to pasture, or through splitting of once large forests into small islands between clear felled areas. Vanilla, walnuts, cashews, apples, cloves, game birds and mammals, and many house plants are all forest elements we use. Well-managed harvest of products, whether timber, nuts, fruits or mosses, requires consideration of the future production of the site. This principle of sustained yield has long underpinned forest management. But now we are recognising the other aspects of natural resources: the water cycled, the dust caught, the landscape enhanced, the bird song relaxing us.

may be contributing to global warming. Sometimes, shop owners will describe a tropical wood as a familiar hardwood based on appearance: I am writing this on a table sold to me as oak but actually is an unnamed tropical wood.

The import of tropical timber is directly related to our commitment through the Convention on Biological Diversity to combat international biodiversity loss. Forests worldwide hold about half of the species present in terrestrial habitats. Loss of forest impacts on the other many services ecosystems provide to humans. For example, many poor rural communities use forests for cooking fuel and for fodder for domestic animals. Wild animals are major protein sources, and then there are cultural traditions, clean water, mushrooms, etc.

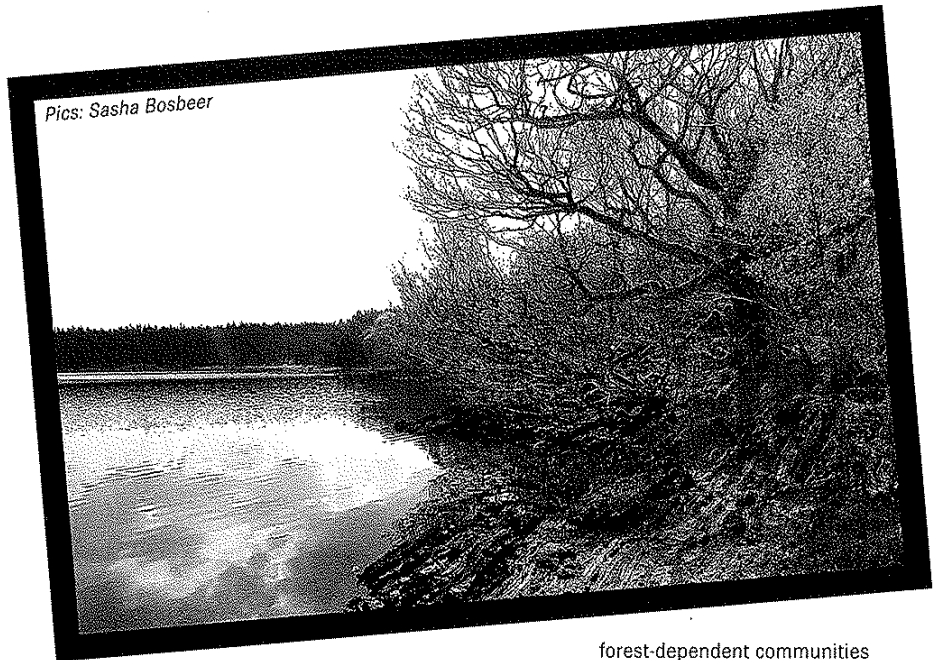
Illegal logging

In many parts of the world: tropical,

temperate and boreal, forests are being harvested in contravention of the local laws. Tropical timber being imported into Ireland may be felled illegally or even be of species listed in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Although Ireland claims to support the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan of the EU, it earned a place at the very bottom of ranking by WWF on twenty-seven European countries' implementation of FLEGT. Ireland has done nothing to implement this action plan; the government does not even have a public procurement policy excluding illegally felled timber. Offaly County Council does have a timber procurement policy, adopted in 2001, but, seven years on, it has done nothing to implement this policy. In an attempt to remind Offaly Co Council of its responsibility to implement their timber policy, Just Forests, an NGO which promotes responsible timber use in Ireland, recently held a week-long campaign outside Offaly Co Council H.Q. in Tullamore. "You can support this campaign by signing the on-line petition at www.justforests.org " says Tom Roche of Just Forests.

It is profitable for people to log illegally because there is such a demand for wood products, including paper and packaging, and because importing countries don't control the source of what is being imported. Sometimes we are spoiling ourselves: do we really need mahogany or oroko for that look? Many of our temperate timbers – elm, walnut, cherry, sycamore, and oak – are fabulously attractive. It is the inequality of the world economy which makes using the tropical timbers more affordable, along with defects in economic models such as treating natural services as free.

Just as we did recently with energy usage, it is time for us to cop on. An area the



Pics: Sasha Bosbeer

size of Croke Park is deforested every second, according to Just Forests. In a forest so diverse that there may be more than thirty different tree species in a hectare, the potential permanent loss of all sorts of species - trees, herbs, mosses, algae, lichen, fungi, invertebrates, birds, and mammals - is immense.

Forest Stewardship Council

We as consumers can still choose responsibly managed timber, fuel, and other forest products, by choosing products certified independently as coming from well-managed forests. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is an independent international quality standard backed by environmental heavyweights such as WWF and Greenpeace as the most trustworthy forest certification scheme.

FSC has a broad interpretation of responsible forestry. Not only is the ecosystem considered but also

forest-dependent communities and worker's rights. Responsible forest management must be economically viable, but without damaging the environment, the benefits the forest brings to local communities, or the future productivity of the forest. More than 100 million ha of forest is certified worldwide to FSC standards in seventy-nine countries, spanning the tropics, temperate forests, and the coniferous boreal forests.

Buying a product with the FSC trademark means purchasing a product that has been tracked from an independently audited responsibly managed forest to the sawmill and on to the shop. B&Q has a policy of selling FSC-certified wood products – just have a look for the tree logo. The latest Harry Potter novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, was printed in the US on FSC-certified paper!

Get involved in Ireland

The Irish Forest Certification Initiative (IFCI) is one of forty-six FSC national initiatives around the world. Anyone with an interest can become a member, and in fact membership of a wide variety of different groups is very welcome. Members join environmental, social, or economic chambers, and decision-making is balanced between these three chambers to ensure fair negotiation between the different interest groups.

IFCI aims to promote responsible forest management in Ireland through development of a national FSC standard, and also to promote responsible purchasing in Ireland. We will be visiting a certified forest during our AGM in August, and I look forward to meeting you and all new members there.

Sasha Bosbeer is a social forester and forest ecologist who lectures at Galway Mayo Institute of Technology. She is currently chair of the Irish FSC National Initiative. For more information on FSC certification and to join in helping promote responsible forestry in Ireland and abroad, see irishforestcertification.com and FSC.org.

