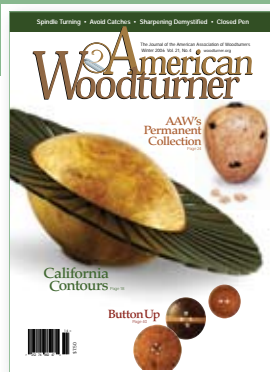


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Environmental Responsibility

By Bradford Whitman



This is the first of a two-part article about tropical hardwoods by Brad Whitman, an AAW member, attorney, environmental advocate, and arbitrator.

I have always believed that we woodturners should take particular care to ensure that our arts-and-crafts practice does not harm the natural environment. We are closer to the wood for longer periods of time than other people, and we rely on, and appreciate, the inner beauty of the tree.

From my perspective, woodturners are far behind other consumers of wood and tropical forest products with respect to awareness of substantial adverse environmental impact and the need for change. A day does not pass now without a feature article appearing in the *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *Newsweek*, or other national publication discussing how a corporation, school, local government, or other entity is assessing its environmental footprint (particularly with respect to greenhouse gas emissions).

Although the environment has become a priority, 90 percent of woodturners are almost completely uninformed regarding

the endangerment of tree species (described loosely as exotic hardwoods), the crisis of tropical deforestation, and the evils of the blind purchasing system used by woodturners.

The time is long overdue for woodturners, individually and collectively, to become environmentally informed and responsible about timber origins.

I should admit that I did have a head start in becoming personally aware of environmental issues. My passion for trees, nature, and the ecosystem (especially birds) preceded my passion for woodturning by many years. In fact, the latter is an outgrowth of the former. I remember well my first experience with woodworking. My grandfather carved birds and, under his guidance, I learned to carve and paint a red-eyed vireo, a songbird that migrates annually to the northeast United States from neo-tropical forests.

Although woodturning entered my life while I was in high school, the seed did not really germinate until the 1990s when I spent a Memorial Day weekend in David Ellsworth's studio. David's barn doors were flung open to the songs and sounds of spring in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The red-eyed vireo was surely one of the singers.

In short, it was impossible for me not to question the relationship between woodturning and the environment. The fact that I had become a career environmental lawyer ensured that I would be taking a good, hard look.

An organic approach

I chose David as my teacher in part because he demonstrates the organic approach to turning that begins with a raw, locally grown log and ends with a flowing art form. This approach respects, and often incorporates in the final piece, all of nature's gifts—the grain patterns, wood figure, cracks, voids, bark, and spalt.

This organic, close-to-nature approach offers the ultimate in harmony with the environment. There is no doubt in my mind that domestic North American tree species can be as exotically beautiful as imported tropical hardwoods.

Identifying tree species

Woodturners and their suppliers are rarely precise in their identification of tree or wood species. One major Internet supplier of exotic woods for turners lists an astounding array of 86 different species by common name (trees often have multiple

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Left: This photo was taken at Carmelita, deep inside Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve. At the time the photo was taken, the man pictured was president of the community's forestry cooperative, which is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). He is standing on a forest access road that had been logged two years earlier. The Rainforest Alliance's TREES program has worked with the community to help them get better prices for their wood, gain export markets for species that used to end up as fence posts and firewood, and create finished products from boards to desks.

common names just as plants do) from A (African blackwood) to Z (Ziricote). You can purchase any of these woods with the click of a mouse and without any reliable information regarding potentially endangered or threatened status, true country of origin, or the manner in which the tree was grown and harvested. These key details determine the scope of impact on the ecosystem.

Accurate identification of species can be difficult or impossible when it is based solely on seeing a block of turning stock on a table or in a photograph. In the field, the tree bark is a good clue and the leaves a better one.

A well-illustrated encyclopedia of woods of the world is very helpful for identifying species, countries of origin, and wood properties. One such sourcebook is *A Guide to Useful Woods of the World* by James Flynn and published by the International Wood Collectors Society. It contains descriptions and photos of 279 woods.

A respected international entity, Flora and Fauna International (FFI) has developed an excellent, but somewhat limited, website entitled "Global Trees Campaign," which contains excellent profiles of a number of threatened tree species. This website (globaltrees.org) does not purport to be comprehensive, but has an excellent selection.

The point is that without knowing fundamental facts such as those collected on the website, a purchaser of foreign hardwoods simply cannot make an environmentally responsible purchasing decision. The typical supplier offers woodturning stock without basic, verifiable information, such as the accurate scientific name, the true geographic origin, and the forest management practices where the tree was grown.

To illustrate the scope of this problem, I selected one genus of tropical hardwoods highly esteemed by woodturners, the genus containing all *Dalbergia* species. This genus includes rosewood, cocobolo, African blackwood, tulipwood, kingswood, and others. I interviewed by telephone and e-mail various wood suppliers regarding the status and availability of *Dalbergia*. The suppliers uniformly maintained that the only endangered *Dalbergia* species was Brazilian rosewood, *Dalbergia nigra*. They provided no information regarding threats to any other *Dalbergia*.

I then consulted the species status listing published online by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). CITES (cites.org) listed only *Dalbergia nigra* in Appendix I, the most highly endangered category defined to include trees facing complete extinction in the wild.

I broadened my investigation and concluded that CITES appears to be suffering from severe bureaucratic paralysis regarding tree classification. The governing body does not list a tree even if the host country presents compelling evidence—unless other member countries agree. There may be a



The farmer in the photo is one of the thousands of farmers who are chopping down trees and burning land in Guatemala's Laguna del Tigre National Park, part of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. The reserve was created to protect the habitat of endangered species, but has suffered steady colonization by landless farmers from the highlands who plant corn, beans, and other food crops. The Guatemalan government has been unable to halt this practice.

number of reasons underlying CITES' single listing, but compelling evidence exists that many *Dalbergia* are endangered and threatened. CITES itself has placed 20 *Dalbergia* "under evaluation."

A much more comprehensive picture is presented in the Red List (iucnredlist.org), published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). I found this listing superior in many ways: It is much more precise, readable, and comprehensive. And it is searchable online by species, by country, and by common name.

The Red List classifies 58 *Dalbergia* species as facing a high risk of extinction in the wild (classified as "vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered"). The IUCN lists many Southeast Asian trees omitted entirely by CITES.

It is well known that deforestation has escalated at an appalling rate in Africa and

Southeast Asia. The level of environmental consciousness and resource protection in these countries has been far outpaced by the cutting. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization reported that from 2000 through 2005, Nigeria lost 56 percent of its primary forest (defined as a forest where there is “no visible sign of past or present human activity”); Cambodia, 29 percent; and Indonesia, 13 percent.

These are astounding statistics, and they corroborate the grim picture shown by the IUCN Red List (news.mongabay.com). The Global Trees Campaign presents sketches of how and why certain

It is impossible to tell if a wood block really does come from a plantation unless it has a “chain of custody” that is independently verified by an entity such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

trees have become endangered.

Consider, for example, the African blackwood (mpingo or *Dalbergia melanoxylon*). For some reason (probably politics and international wrangling), this particular *Dalbergia* has not been elevated to endangered status even on the IUCN Red List. Yet Global Trees reports that the species, which is prized for its dense, fine black grain and lustrous, natural-oil finish, is at high risk of extinction in the wild. It was proposed by three governments for CITES Appendix II status in 1994—13 years ago. The tree grows very slowly, matures in 70 years, is being cut at a completely

unsustainable rate, is in huge demand from manufacturers of musical instruments and, most recently, has been marketed in the Far East for parquet flooring. Furthermore, mpingo is subject to huge waste in milling—90 percent of the entire tree is lost because of cracking and twisted branches.

Based on these facts, it is hard to justify taking any mpingo for woodturning.

Environmental impact

Adverse environmental impact, of course, extends beyond the tree species itself to the biodiversity of the forest ecosystem in which the tree grows. If the tree is harvested from an established plantation instead of a wild rainforest, the impact is minimized. However, plantation trees are a distinct minority of the exotic hardwoods sold on the American market. Furthermore, it is impossible to tell if a wood block really does come from a plantation unless it has a “chain of custody” that is independently verified by an entity such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

In any event, most Americans are familiar with the issue of rainforest ecosystem vulnerability: the fragile, shallow topsoils subject to extreme erosion and siltation, the steep slopes, and the intense rainfall. These and many other factors are carefully weighed in the FSC system before a forest is certified and a harvested tree is stamped with approval.

Uncertified international wood trade

There are major problems inherent in the trade of international hardwoods. There are many points in the harvesting, labeling,

exportation, importation, and ultimate sale where error and fraud can and do enter.

One large importer of *Dalbergia* described to me how fresh-cut cocobolo logs were mixed into his lot of purported storm-felled, salvaged trees. The wood brokers I interviewed were candid in admitting that there is a high degree of environmentally destructive and illegal logging occurring in tropical countries.

It is beyond doubt that turners striving to be environmentally responsible face a much more difficult problem than purchasers of milled lumber, plywood, and other types of forest products. Green success stories in these sectors are becoming common. Three examples are the U.S. Green Building Council (usgbc.org), the ScanCom Group’s study for outdoor furniture makers (fsc.org), and the Rainforest Alliance’s certification of shade-grown coffee (rainforest-alliance.org).

The rainforest problem is indeed a crisis, as the statistics and reports show. In addition, I can speak from personal experience while observing birds in several Latin American countries where I witnessed total habitat destruction from logging and the eradication of endemic species found only in limited areas. Massive deforestation also contributes significantly to global warming.

In the Spring 2008 issue, Brad will detail how the Forest Stewardship Council operates to overcome the obstacles posed by the global trade of tropical hardwoods, and the changes woodturners need to embrace.

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