

Comfort Without Consequences

We may spend days considering the style of furnishings we want for our homes, yet we rarely give a thought to where these items originate, or what they're actually made from. The wood for a bookshelf or table, for instance, could come from a tree grown on a large farm or plantation. But it's equally likely—particularly if the item is made of an “exotic” wood like teak or mahogany—that it originated in an endangered old-growth forest in Brazil or Indonesia. The Earth's tropical forests are now disappearing at an alarming rate, yet they remain vital to our everyday lives—sheltering diverse plant and animal species, preventing soil erosion, and moderating global climate.



Much of the more inexpensive “wood” furniture (usually made from particleboard) isn't especially good for people or the planet either. These products often contain toxic substances that can off-gas into your home—including formaldehyde, a suspected carcinogen used in adhesives, paints, and varnishes. Furniture with foam-filled cushions poses another peril. Foam is commonly treated with fire-retardant chemicals called polybrominated diphenyl ethers, or PBDEs. Exposure to PBDEs, which are chemical cousins to the banned PCBs, is particularly harmful to fetuses and can cause brain and reproductive system disorders.

DID YOU KNOW...?

- * The planet has lost nearly half of its forested area in the past 8,000 years, with the majority of this loss occurring in the 20th century. Between 1980 and 1995 alone, at least 2 million square kilometers of forests were destroyed, an area larger than Mexico.
- * Poaching of trees is a common practice in “protected” forests. Stealth loggers

illegally cut and pull endangered tree species out of forests to sell on the international market at high prices.

- * Pressure-treated lumber, a material frequently used for playground equipment, often contains arsenic, a toxin that can rub off onto skin and leach into soil.
- * A recent study revealed high levels of the chemical compounds PBDEs in the breast milk of North American women.

CHALLENGE YOURSELF AND OTHERS:

When you see teak or other endangered wood species being sold in the marketplace, find out if the retailers know where the wood was cut—and encourage them to seek more environmentally sound alternatives. For more information on endangered wood species, go to www.cites.org.

SUCCESS STORIES

- ❖ Consumers in many countries can now choose wood carrying the “FSC” label, guaranteeing it was cut from a sustainably managed forest. The independent Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) has certified more than 39 million hectares of such forest worldwide.
- ❖ Home Depot, the largest wood retailer in the United States, has vowed to buy wood only from sustainably managed forests. Furniture retailer IKEA has made a similar pledge, and avoids using flame-retardant PBDEs and many other toxins in its products.
- ❖ In 2001, the European Union recognized and banned the use of certain PBDEs in manufacturing. The U.S. is starting to follow suit: in 2003, California voted to ban the manufacture and use of two types of PBDEs starting in 2008.



SIMPLE THINGS YOU CAN DO:

- ✓ Opt for second-hand furniture whenever possible. This not only saves trees and other materials, but also prevents useful items from taking up space in landfills.
- ✓ Look for the FSC label on all wood products you buy. If you don't see it, ask your local retailers to carry items with it.
- ✓ If you're making your own furniture, use recycled or salvaged wood products. In the United States, SmartWood's Rediscovered Wood Program certifies wood that would otherwise be chipped up or carted to a landfill.
- ✓ When buying foam-filled furniture, including mattresses, ask whether flame-retardant chemicals were used in their manufacture. Safer substitutes include the wool batting used to encase mattresses—which is naturally flame-retardant.
- ✓ Get involved when your schools or communities make large wood-product purchases. For outdoor furniture, distribute information about recycled plastic picnic tables, lumber (for playgrounds, for instance), and other products.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- 👉 Greenpeace's **Forest Campaign** (www.greenpeace.org) raises awareness and applies political pressure to save natural forests.
- 👉 **Forest Stewardship Council** (www.fscoax.org) trains, accredits, and monitors lumber certifiers and awards its stamp of approval to sustainably harvested wood.
- 👉 **The Green Guide** (www.thegreenguide.com) offers consumers advice about environmentally friendly wood and upholstered furniture purchases.
- 👉 **ForestEthics** (www.forestethics.org) campaigns to raise awareness about endangered forests.