

'Sustainable' timber is not always what it seems

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Most products sourced from tropical timber destroy the forest – and a sustainability logo may not be a reliable guide for your green conscience. While a report this week celebrates a 50 per cent increase in the area of tropical forests that are sustainably managed, other studies suggest this assessment is open to question.

The area of tropical forests that are sustainably managed is up from 36 million hectares in 2005 to 53 million hectares, according to a report from the International Tropical Timber Organization published this week. The ITTO's members include most of the countries involved in the tropical timber trade.

But 53 million hectares is still only 10 per cent of all productive tropical forests. "I was hoping for a bit more," says Duncan Poore, the British forestry scientist who led the 33-country study for the ITTO.

"Sustainability is much more part of the culture of forestry now, but it is often not being put into practice yet," Poore told *New Scientist*. In the mid-1980s, when Poore conducted the first study of this kind, less than 1 per cent was sustainably managed.

But can we trust the new figures? The Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), based in Bogor, Indonesia, has warned that a lot of timber sold with the most famous sustainability logo, from the Forest Stewardship Council, does not actually meet the FSC's strict rules.

A CIFOR study, published online in December (*Forest Policy and Economics*, DOI: [10.1016/j.forpol.2010.11.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2010.11.005)), found that only three out of the 10 FSC-certified forests in Cameroon operate "using techniques that are likely to ensure future harvest at the same rate as today".

Some commercial certifiers, who are employed by logging companies, did not strictly apply FSC rules before sanctioning use of the FSC logo, author Paolo Cerutti said. The FSC is jointly controlled by the timber industry and green groups, including WWF.

Manuel Cuariguata of CIFOR says certification in Brazil is similarly lax. Poore says there are currently few incentives to log forests in ways that do not destroy them. Certification is expensive and most markets don't demand it. Meanwhile, it remains more profitable to convert forests to agriculture - especially when, as is now the case, food prices are high but timber prices are low. He [has warned of a "proliferation of FSC-certified free riders"](#).