

## Why harvesting Tropical Rainforest Hardwood from the Amazon even with FSC Certification, is unsustainable

The Amazon Rainforest, often referred to as the "lungs of the Earth," is an irreplaceable global treasure. It harbors around 10% of the world's known biodiversity, regulates the global climate, and supports the livelihoods of millions of people. Among its many resources, tropical hardwoods are particularly valuable for their durability, strength, and aesthetic qualities. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification aims to ensure that timber is harvested sustainably, balancing environmental, social, and economic needs. However, even with FSC certification, the harvesting of tropical rainforest hardwood from the Amazon remains unsustainable for a variety of reasons, encompassing ecological, social, economic, and enforcement challenges as highlighted in the following 8 points.

### 1. Ecological Sensitivity and Biodiversity Loss

The Amazon is a highly complex and sensitive ecosystem. Tropical hardwoods, such as Mahogany and Green / Purpleheart, are integral to the rainforest's structure and function.

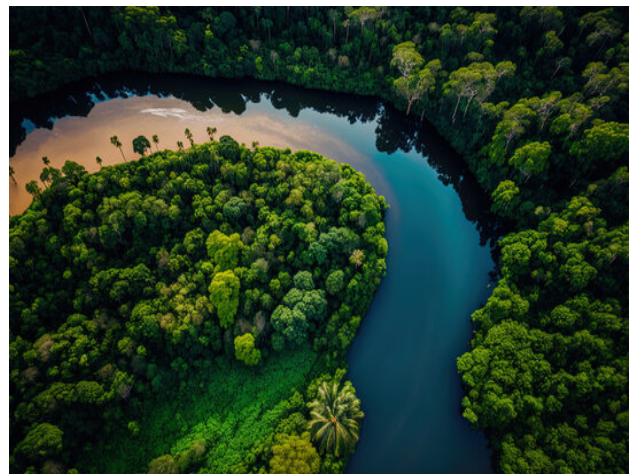
**Keystone Species:** These and many other hardwood species are keystone species, meaning their presence is crucial for the ecosystem's stability. Their removal can lead to cascading effects on biodiversity. For instance, the Green Heart tree provides habitat for a variety of species, from epiphytic plants (plants that grow and climb on other plants like an orchid on a tree trunk) to birds and insects.

**Biodiversity Hotspot:** The Amazon is home to approximately 390 billion individual trees belonging to 16,000 different species with around 1.4 billion trees each year being harvested. Logging, even if selective and certified, disrupts habitats, leading to a decline in species populations and loss of biodiversity. A study published in "Nature" estimates that nearly 17% of the Amazon has been deforested, primarily due to logging and agriculture, which directly threatens countless species.

### 2. Carbon Sequestration and Climate Change

The Amazon Rainforest plays a critical role in regulating the Earth's climate by acting as a significant carbon sink.

**Carbon Storage:** Trees in the Amazon store large amounts of carbon in their biomass. In properly managed forests, trees are replaced from those taken and sequester carbon quicker than an older tree. The issue is that the trees being harvested are not being replaced and thus, less carbon is being sequestered from our atmosphere which plays a huge part when it comes to global warming.



### 3. Inadequate Regeneration and Forest Recovery

The slow growth rate of many tropical hardwood species makes sustainable logging challenging.

**Regrowth Challenges:** Tropical hardwoods often take decades, if not centuries, to mature. Greenheart for example, can take over 60 years to reach harvest-able size. Logging practices frequently outpace the natural regeneration rate, leading to long-term depletion of these valuable species. Harvesting of the valuable hardwood is making way for livestock and crops such as Soybean - one of Brazil's major exports worth 47.2 billion US dollars annually. In order for the rain forest to remain in a sustainable ecological way, for every tree that is cut down a new tree should be planted. This just isn't happening.

**Forest Structure:** The intricate structure of the Amazon's ecosystems means that the removal of hardwoods can alter the forest dynamics, making it difficult for the forest to recover fully. Secondary forests that grow back are often less diverse and less capable of providing the same ecological functions as primary forests.

#### **4. Social and Cultural Impacts**

Indigenous and local communities rely heavily on the Amazon for their cultural, social, and economic well-being.

**Displacement:** It is no secret that logging operations, even those certified by FSC can and have lead to the displacement of indigenous communities. The construction of roads and other infrastructure often leads to land conflicts and loss of access to traditional territories. This is just not a problem in the likes of Brazil and Indonesia but all over the world as these indigenous communities are forced from their land due the greed of some big corporates

**Cultural Erosion:** The intrusion of logging companies disrupts the traditional lifestyles and cultural practices of indigenous peoples. A report by Survival International highlights how logging has led to the erosion of cultural heritage and traditional knowledge systems which is being lost at an alarming rate, particularly in the Amazon when many indigenous people live.



#### **5. Illegal Logging and Corruption**

Despite FSC certification, illegal logging remains a pervasive issue in the Amazon. Only 2% of all hardwood coming out of the Amazon has FSC certification so what about the other 98%? This is where time and time again cases have been published where illegal logs have been combined with certified legal logs.

**Extent of Illegal Logging:** The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) estimates that up to 80% of logging in the Amazon is illegal. This includes logging in protected areas, over-harvesting, and the use of fraudulent documentation to launder illegally harvested timber as certified.

**Weak Governance:** Corruption and weak enforcement of forestry laws exacerbate the problem. Local and national authorities often lack the resources or political will to enforce regulations effectively. Given the Amazon Rainforest covers over 6 million square kilometers (25 times the size of New Zealand!), it is particularly hard to govern / monitor thus seriously undermining the credibility of FSC certification.



## 6. Economic Pressures and Unsustainable Practices

Market demand for tropical hardwoods exerts significant pressure on logging companies to maximize profits, sometimes at the expense of sustainability.

**High Demand:** The global demand for tropical hardwoods remains high, driven by their desirability for furniture, flooring, and construction. This demand incentivises logging companies to harvest at unsustainable rates, even if they are certified unfortunately taking more than what is put back.

**Profit-Driven Logging:** The economic incentives for logging are often at odds with sustainable practices. Companies may engage in selective logging of the most valuable trees, which disrupts the forest ecosystem and does not allow for adequate recovery.

## 7. Certification and Compliance Issues

FSC certification, while well-intentioned, has several inherent flaws that limit its effectiveness in ensuring truly sustainable hardwood logging practices.

**Certification Costs:** The costs associated with obtaining and maintaining FSC certification can be prohibitive for smaller, potentially more sustainable operations. This often leaves certification in the hands of larger companies that potentially prioritize profit over sustainability.

**Enforcement Gaps:** The FSC relies on periodic audits and self-reporting by companies, which can lead to lapses in compliance. There have been numerous reports of certified operations failing to meet FSC standards, leading to environmental degradation.

**Transparency and Accountability:** The FSC certification process often lacks transparency and accountability, making it difficult for consumers and stakeholders to assess its effectiveness.

**Opaque Processes:** The criteria for certification and the results of audits are not always publicly available, leading to questions about the rigor and consistency of the certification process.

**Limited Public Involvement:** Local communities and environmental groups often have limited input in the certification process, which can lead to decisions that do not adequately address local ecological and social concerns.



## 8. Long-term Sustainability Concerns

The cumulative impact of logging, even when certified, raises significant concerns about the long-term sustainability of the Amazon Rainforest.

**Degraded Landscapes:** Areas that have been logged, even selectively, often become degraded landscapes that struggle to regenerate. This leads to a loss of biodiversity and ecological functions over time.

**Climate Resilience:** The degradation of the Amazon reduces its resilience to climate change. Healthy forests are better able to withstand and adapt to changing climate conditions, but unsustainable logging considerably weakens this capacity.

## **Conclusion**

The harvesting of tropical rain-forest hardwood from the Amazon, even with FSC certification, remains unsustainable due to a combination of ecological, social, economic, and enforcement challenges. The rainforest is a unique and irreplaceable ecosystem that requires a holistic and stringent approach to conservation. FSC certification, while a step in the right direction, falls short of addressing the complexities and sensitivities of logging in this critical region.

To truly protect the Amazon, we need to shift our focus from logging this hardwood to more sustainable alternatives and preserving protected areas by supporting community-based forest management. Educating those involved in importing, designing, and constructing with tropical rainforest hardwoods about their sources is an excellent first step. To ensure the long-term health and resilience of rainforests like the Amazon, we need international cooperation, stronger governance, and increased transparency. Whilst FSC certification has good intentions, people need to look beyond this and truly understand how the extent of unsustainable logging is helping in the deforestation and therefore destruction of our fragile planet. Certification standards such as PEFC in Australia, which are transparent, accountable, and rigorously monitored, provide an excellent basis for sourcing sustainable hardwood.

By recognising the limitations of current certification systems and committing to more robust conservation strategies and sources of hardwood, we can work towards a future where the likes of the Amazon rainforest continues to thrive, providing invaluable ecological, climatic, and social benefits for generations to come.

***Opinion Piece By: Martin Thompson - LMA Timber Founder and Director - Sept 2024***