

WWF holds concerns for cork

By SALLY EASTON MW



As the world becomes increasingly aware of the environmental impact of all its choices, the time has come to shine the spotlight on the environmental issues of closures – cork harvest versus bauxite mining versus oil extraction.

It's not even the cork industry that's raised this particular flag this time around.

None less than the WWF (formerly the Worldwide Fund for Nature) waded into the closure debate earlier this year, publishing a report with a couple of scary scenarios for cork oak landscapes if the wine industry were to significantly diminish its use of cork for stoppers.

And the WWF is addressing the wine industry, not the cork industry.

So here's what they say. Cork oak landscapes are an important resource, covering 2.7 million hectares across Portugal, Spain, Algeria, Morocco, Italy, Tunisia and France.

They form part of the critical/endangered Mediterranean forests and scrubland group, which experience hot dry summers, and cool, moist winters.

Even south-western Australia is home to a small corner of such Mediterranean forest – the second richest Mediterranean plant community in the world, according to the WWF.

As well as rich biodiversity, where the level of plant diversity can reach 135 species a square metre – which may be worthy of conservation in itself – the Mediterranean cork oak landscapes are managed.

According to one cork forest owner, it is a "business forest". There is also a moot acknowledgment that the 'business' should be managed carefully so as not to waste or destroy any of the business assets:

The cork oak trees themselves, grazing livestock, game for hunting, agricultural crops such as pint nuts, cheese and honey, as well as eco-tourism opportunities.

Cork stopper production may account for two-thirds of the total value of the cork market, but it is only one source of total income, albeit an important one, from these landscapes.

It is undoubtedly the reason for the focus on the wine industry of the WWF report.

One of main challenges for cork forest owners is managing the income of hunting

with the needs of cork oak regeneration.

Cork oak seedlings are delicate things and take many years to establish themselves. Hunts are not and provide rich pickings quite quickly.

In addition to this, having too many cattle and sheep graze in the sparsely grassed montados of Portugal and dehesas of Spain (mixed open land and forest with cereal, with other crops, grass, olive, holm oak) means seedlings are often eaten or broken. Sometimes as many as one cow or three sheep per hectare can be too much for these delicately balanced and managed ecosystems. So natural regeneration is failing. The most conscientious owners put metal protective frames around cork oak seedlings which can withstand several years of attempts by livestock to access the saplings, but these are expensive.

It's a real challenge that cork landscapes are virtually always managed for the next generation. This can make the long term view almost too far away. Cork oaks are only harvested every nine to 12 years, and they're at least 25-years-old before the first useful harvest can be made.

The importance of achieving an environmental, social and economic balance of these landscapes is at the heart of the WWF's concerns.

But they argue that over the past decade, damaging policies, poor forest management and a change of the cork market have resulted in the degradation and loss of these unique habitats.

They argue the biggest threats are increasing human pressure on resources through overgrazing, over-harvesting, over-conversion to agriculture, and forest clearance, land abandonment, as well as forest fires that occur with increasing frequency.

Do we need reminding that cork is a natural, renewable, recyclable and biodegradable product?

No trees are cut down to harvest the cork bark. Well managed cork oak landscapes stabilise soil and lower water-erosion risk, they buffer against forest fires, and slow the spread of desertification, especially in a warming world.

An important and realistic choice for cork growers is to provide traceable raw material from forests certified to adopt sustainable management practices for the landscape. This is achieved by forest accreditation. The Forest Stewardship Council promotes the responsible management of the world's forests, setting mini-

mum standards to meet responsible management for forest types. So, individual standards exist for FSC certification of cork oak forests, as opposed to other types of forest.

The standards are designed to take into account the various land uses and the needs of sustainability and regeneration.

A group of accredited third party certification bodies assesses forest parcels that are suitably managed.

For example 12,000ha are certified in Spain and 1000ha in Portugal. There are more than 700,000ha of cork oak landscape in each of Spain and Portugal, so it's early days.

The 'chain of custody' i.e. traceability, means every time a product is bought or sold, each step must be certified.

It is thus easy to envisage the accreditation of solid cork stoppers, though granules could be a bit more complex.

Amorim in Portugal already has an FSC-accredited processing plant, which offers FSC-accredited natural cork stoppers.

Amorim's communication director Carlos de Jesus says it is the company's strategy to source FSC-accredited raw cork material where it's available.

The South Africans have started playing their biodiversity card to early acclaim.

WWF states the South African fynbos as being the richest Mediterranean plant community in the world.

It also is on their critical/endangered list.

According to Wines of South Africa, their biodiversity initiative "represents a new orientation and philosophy in our wine industry as producers embrace a philosophy of farming that respects the environment, preserves what is unique in our heritage, and nurtures respect among all the people who work on our farms and in our cellars."

Should this extend to choice of packaging? The whole environmental thing has a lot of merit, but it's not a baton the cork industry can run with yet.

It so long refused to pick up the TCA baton that there is still some way for the industry to go in that race.

Not until the whole cork industry, rather than two or three key players, adopts best practice, can it realistically even consider any other argument.

Details: The WWF report can be downloaded at: http://assets.panda.org/downloads/cork_rev12_print.pdf

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