

TALKING **TIMBER**

WHEN WOOD SCIENCE IS USED FOR THE WRONG REASON!

Wood Technology Society chairman John Park shares his frustration at certain sustainability messaging in the industry which doesn't help the cause of wood



I want you to read the following two statements – the first is from a recent issue (March 2017) of a woodworking industry publication the second from a recent issue (May 2017) of a high-profile glossy magazine with a build it yourself focus.

"In creating a wood with comparable properties to tropical hardwood that can be grown in a FSC-certified, sustainably managed forest, the demand for tropical wood is reduced,

allowing timber to once again be an important part of sustainable construction."

"...has developed a method for converting cheap pulpwood into a highly sustainable substitute for tropical hardwood by treating it with glue, heat and pressure."

The originator of the second statement is someone who should know better; the first statement may, I have no way of knowing, have been editorially obtained from the manufacturer's product information.

At the recent Timber Trade Federation Hardwood Conference I made the comment that we must continue to remain alert to all the messaging out there which is still presenting a negative image of wood use and the global environment. One of the panel commented that that is no longer an issue and we should forget about it and move on. To say I was speechless is something of an understatement as I do have a tendency in meetings to get a bit worked up over issues I feel strongly about – and this is one of them!

Another issue I feel strongly about is the way some wood products manufacturers persistently knock other wood products or the solid wood alternative as inferior to their own proprietary products rather than sticking to just the promotion of its own merits. I have termed that practice 'besmircheting'! The wood products industry is very, very good at it! For some strange reason they prefer to see wood and other wood products as the competition rather than plastic or steel or concrete!

Wood science over the years has enabled the development of an astonishing array of wood products which has taken an already naturally astonishing raw material to ever increasing heights, quite literally of late, but which has brought with it that inevitable besmircheting. I must also confess to my own wood product 'prejudices' but they are (with a couple of exceptions) with regard to inappropriate use rather than the products themselves as all of them, when appropriately used, do the job for which they were intended – thanks to wood science!

I trust, as wood industry professionals, you can all see what is

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profoundly wrong with those two opening statements – answers on a post-card please to ...! But I'll spell it out anyway.

In general terms the insinuation is that the use of tropical hardwoods is environmentally damaging and therefore bad. More specifically they are insinuating that tropical forests are not grown in an FSC-certified, sustainably managed forest and being a 'highly sustainable' substitute would have us believe that tropical hardwood isn't and that if you use tropical hardwood you won't have sustainable construction!!

All forests, bar none, are potentially highly sustainable – provided that, of course, they are appropriately managed. A tropical forest with no commercial value as a source of wood products will soon become something other than forest! And another thing worth mentioning to anyone who feels that wood is too expensive – just point out that third party forest certification is not available as a charitable service!

Yes, I know it's not all perfect in all the planet's tropical forests but don't use wood science to belittle nature's bounty. If all wood sectors, industries and companies worked together for the common good we could change the world! ■

*Below: Knocking
tropical hardwood
as less
"sustainable"
compared to other
wood products can
be misleading and
unhelpful*



The Wood Technology Society

A Division of the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining