



Friend or foe?

While some of Greenpeace's forest campaigns might appear to suggest the contrary, the NGO is keen to work with, not against, the timber industry. Sally Spencer reports

When Greenpeace forest campaigner John Sauven announced to delegates at the TTF's seminar on China (*TTJ* December 10/17, 2005) that the NGO is "not anti-business, not anti-trade and certainly not anti-timber", some of the timber traders in the room may have been a little sceptical.

However, it's a message that senior forest campaigner, Pat Venditti, is also keen to convey. "It's not a 'them and us' situation," he said. "We have a very good relationship with progressive timber traders and those who are taking responsibility for sourcing timber products."

And that includes companies that have been on the receiving end of Greenpeace's shock tactic campaigns. "We've exposed a number of companies who, at the time, are angry with us, but with whom we now work to ensure the timber they are buying is environmentally and socially responsibly sourced," he added.

Of course, it's the highly emotive, headline-grabbing campaigns that incense the timber industry but, for Greenpeace, it's an approach that works flawlessly. "Our China plywood report last October [which coincided with a banner campaign outside Defra's offices] named a number of companies," said Mr Venditti. "The report got their attention which opened the door and allowed us to sit down with them and explain the evidence. In our experience, if we were to produce a report and mail it to everyone, a lot of the industry wouldn't react. By exposing it through the media we find that people are more receptive to actually changing their practices."

Greenpeace campaigns globally, but its hotspots continue to be the primary rainforests of the Amazon and South-east Asia. China is "an enormous problem", said Mr Venditti. "They have no real monitoring of what's going into the country in terms of illegally felled timber and it's a buyer's market. We can put the onus on China to a degree, but a lot of its production exists because western markets take advantage of its low prices."

The NGO's China plywood report elicited a generally positive response from the trade (*see box*). "A number of them suspended purchases of bintangor-faced plywood coming out of China," said Mr Venditti. "But, what we don't want to see is one species from Papua New Guinea (PNG) being replaced by another from the same country without addressing the fundamental issue – which is not purchasing timber that doesn't come from socially and environmentally responsible forest management."

Who benefits?

Greenpeace would argue that there should be no timber exports from PNG at all and disagrees with the school of thought that says trade links should be maintained in favour of boycotts in order to aid developing countries. "We need to ask who's benefiting from the development of those resources and in a number of countries – PNG, central Africa – it's a questionable assumption that the development of timber resources has had a beneficial effect on development for the majority of people in those countries."

The organisation also refutes the claim that it targets

SUMMARY

- The primary rainforests of the Amazon and South-east Asia are Greenpeace's main campaign hotspots.
- Soya conversion is also seen as a major cause of deforestation in the Amazon.
- Greenpeace supports FSC chain of custody certification.
- It advocates legislation against illegal timber.



Greenpeace's high-profile campaign tactics have "opened doors" for the NGO

PHOTOS: GREENPEACE

the timber industry to the exclusion of others. "We work on a whole range of issues to do with resource extraction," said Mr Venditti. "We don't look at it from the trade perspective of timber versus steel, but our forest campaign works on protecting ancient forests, so we look at who is buying from these regions of the world – and that's obviously not the plastics industry."

He does, however, acknowledge the impact agriculture has on primary forest. "We did some flyovers in Brazil where soya conversion is a major problem and that was reported in *The Independent*," he said. "And Friends of the Earth and WWF are working on oil palm conversion in South-east Asia."

ONE COMPANY'S COMMITMENT

Premier Forest Products Ltd, one of the companies named in Greenpeace's China plywood report, has made significant efforts to ensure it makes responsible purchasing decisions.

In addition to taking on an environmental consultant, the company is also part-financing an independent scoping study of timber mills in China. This, said Premier's purchasing director Terry Edgell, will "give greater insight into the workings of

these mills and deepen the environmental education process of the workers and managers at the mills.

"All of this activity helps us to develop and evolve our responsible purchasing policy [the company is a signatory to the TTF's Responsible Purchasing Policy], and deepen our commitment to protecting the environment and replenishing renewable sources of timber materials," he added.

And, he says, although we haven't yet witnessed the same level of campaigning against imports of soya as we have of timber, that day will come. "We're looking to protect the areas from deforestation, full stop," said Mr Venditti. "It's clear that the global trade in agricultural commodities is having a highly detrimental effect on the Amazon and South-east Asian rainforests."

Chain of custody is the route to trouble-free timber trading, said Mr Venditti and, for Greenpeace, that means Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification. "We've always advocated knowing where your timber comes from and making sure it's from well-managed – and socially-responsibly managed – forest. At the moment FSC is the only certification scheme we consider delivers all those things. We think the best way traders can have a positive impact is by buying and selling only FSC timber."

Greenpeace is equally unequivocal on the issue of legislation against imports of illegal timber and welcomes the recent Environmental Audit Committee report that recommends just that (*ttfonline* January 20). "Traders who aren't so concerned with legality and sustainability are able to undercut those who are and who are taking steps to implement that," said Mr Venditti.

Call for legislation

"The trade can have a very positive influence, but there's only so much it can do. Business is business and if someone can sell illegal timber and make a buck out of it, they will continue to do so. The only way we see that being properly addressed is prohibition of illegal timber."

However, Mr Venditti isn't holding his breath. "Government has the most ability to change things but is generally the last to the table and the slowest to achieve anything," he said. And he believes that Defra's Central Point of Expertise on Timber Procurement (CPET) has been an improvement, but "could be doing a lot better".

"The question is, what is the government's priority?" he said. "Is it to promote sustainable forest management in a real way – which we think requires FSC or reclaimed timber in their projects – or is it to sort of do that but not make waves with producer country governments? Given the approval of MTCC and PEFC, we think it might be the latter."

And he added that the jury still seemed to be out among timber traders he had spoken with as to how the existence of CPET had impacted on their sales. "It remains to be seen how hard the government will be pushing this through its system," he added.

Notwithstanding his caution regarding government motives, Mr Venditti remains optimistic. "The timber industry has an opportunity to sell itself as a sustainable industry," he said. "We have a lot of examples here in the UK of people moving towards FSC. B&Q and the big DIY sheds are taking very progressive steps. Timbmet is pretty committed to FSC, Travis Perkins is going to full certification of all its products and Wyevale has agreed to move towards FSC. There are more examples of good practice than a few years ago, that's for certain." ■