

Consumer Attitude Towards Tropical Hardwoods in the United Kingdom

SHUKRI MOHAMED, RUSLI MOHD and AWANG NOR ABDUL GHANI

Department of Forest Management

Faculty of Forestry

Universiti Pertanian Malaysia

43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Keywords: consumer, attitude, tropical hardwoods

ABSTRAK

Penyelidikan keatas sikap orang awam di UK terhadap kayu tropika telah dijalankan. Ia juga bertujuan untuk menentukan samada sifat spesies kayu penting kepada pengguna untuk membuat keputusan pembelian barangan kayu serta mengenalpasti sifat keluaran yang diperlukan jika mereka akan membeli keluaran diperbuat dari kayu tropika. Pada amnya, pengguna di UK mempunyai sikap dingin terhadap kayu tropika. Mereka yang bercadang untuk membeli keluaran kayu tropika akan berbuat demikian sekiranya harga keluaran itu setanding, tidak diawet dan diperbuat dari spesies kayu yang dikenali. Keluaran kayu tropika mungkin tidak akan dapat bertahan lama memandangkan kepada sikap dingin pengguna terhadap kayu tropika dan spesies kayu merupakan sifat penting yang diambilkira oleh mereka untuk membuat keputusan pembelian. Pemasar keluaran kayu tropika boleh menggunakan strategi peluang pasaran memandangkan terdapat segmen yang mempunyai sikap positif terhadap kayu tropika terutamanya kaum lelaki dan mereka dari golongan isirumah berpendapatan tinggi. Penyelesaian kepada masalah sikap dingin pengguna ini ialah dengan memasarkan keluaran kayu tropika dari sumber yang terurus.

ABSTRACT

A survey in United Kingdom on public attitude towards tropical timbers showed negative disposition towards tropical hardwoods and wood products. Those considering buying tropical wood products would do so if it was competitively priced, not treated with chemicals or manufactured from timber species known to them. Tropical wood products may not fare better in the future due to greater awareness of environment quality. The survey results revealed that males and those from higher incomes groups unlike the others were willing to purchase tropical hardwood, especially if it was from sustainable forests.

INTRODUCTION

There is currently a deep and widespread public concern about the quality of the environment in the major tropical hardwood-importing countries. Deforestation in the tropical region has been cited to be one of the major causes of the environmental degradation and the commercial tropical rainforest logging is said to be the major activity that results in a chain of events leading to the degradation of the environment the world is currently facing. To many, one of the ways to check global environmental degradation is to stop commercial logging in the tropics. Reducing demand for tropical hardwoods

will stop this commercial logging. Ban on the trade of tropical hardwoods and 'eco-labelling' of tropical wood products are a means of pressuring the tropical hardwood-exporting countries to stop 'destroying' their forest resources and help improve the world's environment. Many governments in the European countries have stopped using tropical hardwoods in their building programmes as a result of pressure from the conservationists. Consumers, are urged to demand for wood products manufactured from timbers other than the supposedly environmental-degrading tropical hardwoods.

The United Kingdom is one of the major importers of tropical hardwoods and their public are said to be less responsive to the various issues currently surrounding tropical hardwoods than other tropical hardwood-importing European countries (Sullivan, 1990; Anonymous, 1993a) and also they very rarely enquire about the source of the timber items (Anonymous, 1993b). Of importance to them are the quality, price and design of the products, and not the the forest management status of the product's origin (MORI, 1990). Imports of tropical hardwoods into UK have since the early 1990s dropped as importers have switched to the perceived sustainably managed North American hardwoods (Upton, 1993) amidst growing pressure from the environmentally-conscious consumers. Beside the attributes of the product itself, a purchaser's decision is also influenced by other wide-ranging factors like his or her own economic "well-being", age and life style, occupation, social class and a myriad of other highly interrelated external and internal factors (Mercer, 1992). The major internal factors, which operate within individuals to partially determine and influence their behaviour as consumers, are perceptions, motives, learning, personality and attitudes (Pride and Ferrel, 1977). An attitude, learned through experience and interaction with others, consist of knowledge and positive or negative feelings held by an individual for an object. When a consumer has a strong negative attitude towards an object, he or she will not only avoid it but will also try to influence others not to buy the product (*ibid.*). Also product attributes influence product choice (Stureson and Sinclair, 1991). There is, however, a lack of direct and predictive relationship between attitudes and external behaviour but a survey of attitudes will provide an indicator of the current beliefs, thoughts, preference and desires held by certain communities (Baker, 1992).

In light of the foregoing, a survey was conducted to study public attitude towards wood in United Kingdom products made from tropical timbers and to determine whether the timber species attributed any importance to the customers' choice. The survey also aimed to identify product attri-

TABLE 1
Demographics of the respondents

Characteristic	Frequency (%) (N = 144)
Sex:	
Male	52
Female	48
Age:	
Young (19 - 24 years)	40
Middle (25 - 39 years)	31
Old (40 years and over)	29
Household income:	
Low (under £10,000 annually)	41
Middle (£10,000 - £19,999 annually)	29
High (over £20,000 annually)	30

butes required by the consumers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data was collected using structured, self-administered questionnaires. Based on a purposive sampling method, university students were asked to distribute the questionnaires to their friends and neighbours above the age of 19 years in their hometown during a mid-semester break. Customers in UK are usually above 19 years. It was hoped that the students from the diverse geographical regions would provide representatives for a realistic sample frame.

The respondents were required to respond to each of the questions in the questionnaire. The attitude of the consumers towards tropical hardwoods was measured using an attitude scale which consist of a series of six sentences regarding tropical hardwoods. The respondents were required to indicate their intensity of feeling towards the object by stating their agreement or disagreement to these sentences. Each answer was given a score and the respondent's total score was used as a measure of his or her attitude towards tropical hardwoods. A negative total score meant that the respondent had an unfavourable attitude, while those with a positive total score had a positive disposition. Semantic differential scaling was used, with respect to the answers, in particular the Likert summated scale. A total of 144 valid question-

TABLE 2
Importance of each product attribute in wooden furniture purchase decision making (N = 144)

Products attributes	Mean importance score	s	Difference between subsamples ¹
Workmanship	4.5	0.8	ns
Species of wood used	4.0	0.9	b
Country in which the item was produced	2.6	1.2	ns
Type of wood material used	4.1	0.8	ns
Retail outlet where product was sold	2.1	1.1	ns
Manufacturer/brand of the item	2.1	1.1	ns
Design of the product	4.3	0.8	ns
Services offered by the seller	2.9	1.2	a,b
Whether the item is produced according to British or other internationally accepted standards	3.6	1.1	ns
Price	3.9	0.9	ns

Note: Scores are based on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = Not at all important, 3 = Fairly important and 5 = Very important.

¹ Statistically significant at 0.05 level, a = difference in means between gender (t-test), b = difference in means between household income groups (ANOVA). An 'ns' denotes no statistical difference at 0.05 level in means between gender, age or household income of the respondents.

TABLE 3
Importance of timber species attribute in purchase decision among subsamples of respondents

Subsample	Mean importance score	s
Sex:		
Male	4.0	0.8
Female	3.9	1.0
Age:		
Young	4.5	0.7
Middle	4.5	0.7
Old	4.5	0.9
Household income:		
Low	3.8	0.9
Middle	3.9	1.2
High	4.3	0.7

naires were returned. The demographics of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

RESULTS

A summary of the results is shown in Tables 1 to 5.

In selecting consumer durables including wood products e.g. furniture the customers consider various attributes such as suitability, quality, price and style (Kotler and Arm-

strong, 1992). Other attributes said to be of importance are style, quality, price, suitability to other existing home furniture and its practical value (Albaladejo, 1986) and rate the importance often different attributes in making their decision. The list of attributes was by no means exhaustive, as the main objective was to determine whether the timber species was an important factor in the purchasers, decision. A summary of the result is shown in Table 2.

Timber Species as an Important Attribute

Evidently, the species of timber used to manufacture the wood product was considered an important attribute to purchasers of furniture. While the level of importance placed on this attribute does not differ significantly between different gender and age of the respondents, the high income groups were more concerned with the species of timber used in the manufacture than those from the low or middle income groups (Table 3).

Consumer attitude to other attributes of wood products

It is also worth noting that the consumers are quality conscious as reflected by the high

importance score accorded to workmanship and the standard of the manufactured wood product. Other attributes of high importance were the product's design and type of wood material used to manufacture the product. It is also interesting to note that the consumers place relatively lower importance on the price of the product.

Consumer Attitude towards Tropical Timber

An overall mean attitude score of -2.4 was obtained, which implies that the respondents have an unfavourable or negative attitude towards tropical hardwoods (Table 4). While the attitude of the respondents towards tropical hardwoods do not differ significantly with their age or household income, their gender did play a significant role. Women appear to be more negative towards tropical hardwoods than men, as their scores are significantly higher than men (Table 5). The mean attitude score for the women respondents of -3.4 is also higher than the overall mean score. There is also a high percentage of those in the low and middle household income groups who do not favour tropical hardwoods.

TABLE 4
Mean attitude score of respondents – by various subsamples

Subsample	Mean attitude score	s
All respondents	-2.4	3.3
Sex: ^a		
Male	-1.5	3.6
Female	-3.4	2.6
Age: ^b		
Young	-2.6	3.1
Middle	-2.2	3.3
Old	-2.3	3.6
Household income: ^b		
Low	-2.9	2.9
Middle	-2.5	2.8
High	-1.5	3.9

Note:^a Significantly different at the 0.05 level (t-test)

^b Not significantly different at the 0.05 level (ANOVA)

Attributes required of tropical wood products

The respondents indicated that they would purchase tropical wood products if the price was competitive with similar items made of other materials. In addition, the wood material used to manufacture the tropical wood product should not be chemically treated, and should have suitable properties for the intended use, and should be of a timber species known to them. Apart from product quality and design, some required that the wood material used should come from managed sources. In addition, the popularity of the timber species used is one of the attributes mentioned by those respondents. Consumers in the UK generally prefer household furniture with real wood and wood finishes, and tropical hardwoods such as teak and mahogany have been popular timber species in the manufacture of household furniture in the UK (ITTO/ITC, 1990). It is worth noting that income is important in a respondent's purchase decision. High income householders tend to place more importance on the timber species than others.

Wood products manufacturers in UK are reducing the amount of tropical hardwood used due to growing pressures by the consumer who are concerned with the current environmental issues (*ibid.*). This is evident from the present study, as the respondents generally had a negative attitude towards tropical hardwoods. The finding is in contrast with earlier reports about the UK consumers' insensitivity towards environmental issues concerning tropical forests and their indifference to the source of timber. With respect to the demographic variables used in this study, female respondents, regardless of their age and household earnings, were more negative towards tropical hardwoods than men.

The consumers in UK have been exposed to various forms of publications and television programmes dealing with the ill-effects of deforestation, especially on the environmental degradation and destruction supposedly as a result of commercial logging in the tropics. Some non-governmental organisations (NGOs), like the Friends of the Earth-UK, published the 'Good Wood Guide' highlighting deforestation in the tropics and has not

TABLE 5
Distribution of respondents in the different subsamples based on their level of attitude towards tropical timbers (percentage)

Subsample	Attitude level		
	Unfavourable	Neutral	Favourable
All respondents	72.2	7.6	20.1
Sex: ^a			
Male	61.3	9.3	29.3
Female	84.1	5.8	10.1
Age: ^b			
Young	75.9	6.9	17.2
Middle	68.2	9.1	22.7
Old	71.4	7.1	21.4
Household income: ^a			
Low	76.3	10.2	13.5
Middle	80.9	4.8	14.3
High	58.1	6.9	34.9

Note: Classification into various level of attitude is based on the respondent's total attitude score

^a Statistically significant relationship between gender and household income and attitude at the 0.05 level (Chi-square test)

^b No statistically significant relationship between age and attitude at the 0.05 level (Chi-square test)

classified tropical timbers as "good wood". Public rallies are often organised by these NGOs at the vicinity of retail stores purportedly selling tropical wood products from unmanaged sources. These efforts have not only raised public awareness on the issue of tropical deforestation, but also probably help develop the consumers' negative attitude towards tropical timbers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, consumers in the United Kingdom generally have a negative attitude towards tropical hardwoods. As the timber species used in the manufacture of a wood product is considered to be an important attribute by consumers in the UK, it could have an adverse effect on the demand for tropical wood products. To be appealing to the general consumers, tropical wood products must not only be priced competitively with similar items made of other timber species and/or non-wood substitutes but should also be appealing to them in terms of quality, design and environmental considera-

tions. Ideally, these wood products should also be manufactured from timbers sourced from environment-friendly managed forests. Marketers of tropical wood products may want to target their products to specific niches positively disposed towards tropical hardwoods. A substantial percentage of the male and high income household respondents in the study do not have negative attitude towards tropical hardwoods, and could be the target niches for marketing tropical wood products. The main contention for the negative attitude towards tropical hardwood is not the timber species itself but on the manner its sources are managed. If the tropical hardwood-producing countries could convince its market that their tropical forest resources are indeed properly managed and logged, there is no reason why those consumers who have been using tropical wood products should stop doing so in the future. The only rational and long-term solution to counter the growing green consumerism is to market wood products from certified, managed tropical forests.

REFERENCES

ALBALADEJO, J.L. 1986. Notes on the marketing of furniture and export trade. Paper presented at *Seminar on the Export Marketing of wooden furniture*. Kuala Lumpur.

ANON. 1993a. A paler shade of green. *Timber Trades Journal* **30** January supplement: 4 - 5.

ANON. 1993b. Not at all green in the garden. *Timber Trades Journal* **27** February: 14 - 15.

BAKER, C. 1992. Attitude and Language. Multi-lingual Matters Ltd.

ITTO/ITC. 1990. Wooden household furniture: A study of major markets. International Trade Centre/GATT, Geneva.

KOTLER, P. and G. Armstrong. 1992. Principles of Marketing. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall International, Inc.

MERCER, D. 1992. Marketing. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers..

MORI. 1990. Tropical rainforests and the environment: A study of public attitudes. Research conducted for the World Wide Fund for Nature. Market Opinion & Research International.

PRIDE, W.M. and D.C. FERREL. 1977. Marketing: Basic concepts and decisions. Houghton: Mifflin Company.

STURESON, F.N. and S.A. SINCLAIR. 1991. United States consumers' views on ready-to-assemble furniture. *Wood and Fiber Science* **23**(2): 207 - 219.

SULLIVAN, F. 1990. Nailing hardwoods. *BBC WILDLIFE*. June: 357.

UPTON, C. 1993. Positively certifiable. *Timber Trades Journal* **30** January supplement: 18 - 20.

(Received 22 December 1993)