

Inspections and research of wooden garden furniture at ten large retailers in the Netherlands

Research by Milieudefensie, May 2007

Executive Summary

For the third year in a row, Milieudefensie [Friends of the Earth Netherlands] has investigated the selection of wooden garden furniture at ten retailers. Milieudefensie made an inventarisation in the stores of the proportion of FSC certified furniture and checked for misleading sustainability claims. GAMMA, Groenrijk, HEMA, IKEA, Intratuin, Kwantum, Leen Bakker, Life & Garden, Praxis Tuin and Tuincentrum Overvecht were researched. Approximately 9,500 pieces of furniture in 63 stores were surveyed.

Of these pieces, 37 per cent was FSC-certified. This furniture comes from forests and plantations which are sustainably managed and where the entire supply chain is independently monitored. The other furniture is of questionable origin: either the source of the furniture is unknown or its source is forests which are not sustainably managed.

On 23 per cent of the furniture, false sustainability claims were found. The consumer of this furniture is given false information on sustainable or legal forest management and is thus misled. These claims cannot be verified, and it is quite possible – in other cases demonstrable – that this furniture comes from forests where destructive or illegal logging takes place. Due to false sustainability claims the consumer cannot consciously choose to buy genuine sustainably produced wood.

Most of the garden furniture surveyed was made from wood originating from the Perum Perhutani plantations on Java (Indonesia). In May 2007 AruPa, a local Indonesian non-profit organisation, conducted a field study on illegal logging and the numerous social conflicts in which these plantations are involved. There are deep-rooted land rights conflicts between the state-run forestry company Perhutani and the local population, which are often expressed in violence. This has led to dozens of fatalities and injuries in recent years.

Most of the illegal logging is perpetrated by companies, district government officials, politicians, the military and village chiefs. The AruPa study showed that in 2006 this was responsible for 40 per cent of illegally logged teak plantation in Randublatung, a district in Central Java.

Milieudefensie also continued to find garden furniture made from teak from Burma, a country run by a military dictatorship which severely violates human rights. Trade in Burmese teak causes large-scale deforestation and finances armed conflict in that country. Garden furniture was also found from varieties of wood from Malaysia and Vietnam, where deforestation and illegal logging are commonplace.

On the basis of the study's findings, Milieudefensie has concluded that increases in the proportion of FSC-certified garden furniture are mainly due to the efforts of home improvement centres (Gamma, Praxis Tuin, Leen Bakker) and Tuincentrum Overvecht (garden centre). Garden Centres such as Groenrijk, Intratuin and Life & Garden, as well as the HEMA department store and IKEA home furnishings lag behind, with a very low proportion of FSC-certified wood.

This causes unfair market competition. Companies that invest in sustainable business face competition from companies which sell cheap wood from unsustainable sources.

Milieudefensie therefore calls upon the government to support companies which are leading the way via policies and to keep illegally harvested wood off the Dutch market by means of legislation.

False sustainability claims are an onerous problem. HEMA and IKEA provide nearly all of their garden furniture with a claim which, according to Milieudefensie, cannot be verified and which misleads consumers. Milieudefensie also found claims in five investigated enterprises, which in 2006 were ruled by the Advertising Code Commission to be misleading and unverifiable. Far fewer false claims were found this year in garden centres than in previous years.

The majority of companies apparently do not take the rulings of the Advertising Code Commission very seriously. Therefore, this year Milieudefensie will go to the Consumer Authority, the consumer rights and fair trade monitoring body of the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs. Milieudefensie expects this body to address the sector and thus put an end to the false claims.

Life & Garden was given the 'Botte Bijl Award' [Blunt Axe Award] in 2007, as the company which had achieved the least. Life & Garden has an extremely low proportion of FSC-certified garden furniture in its stores (five per cent). A specific and sound environmental policy is also lacking and in recent years very little progress has been made. Finally, Milieudefensie found a great deal of wood there which came from Perum Perhutani plantations. As with the other garden centres, however, Life & Garden had also made efforts to address the problem of false claims.

In presenting the Blunt Axe Award, Milieudefensie calls upon Life & Garden to increase its share of FSC-certified wood to 100 per cent and to stop selling wood with questionable origins. To accomplish this, Life & Garden should adopt good environmental policy with specific and ambitious objectives and a step-by-step plan for achieving these in the coming years.