

Partners in Crime: the UK and destruction of the Forest of the Great Apes

Case Study: Vicwood-Thantry whose timber was used in the Cabinet Office

Logging as practised by this company puts in jeopardy the whole forestry policy and sustainable management of our resources - Cameroon Ministry for Environment and Forests (MINEF), Dec.1999

Illegal and destructive logging is now the single largest threat to what remains of the world's ancient forests. It is estimated that the UK is the largest importer of illegal tropical timber in Europe, with some 60% of all tropical timber coming into the UK being sourced from companies involved in illegal logging.ⁱ By turning a blind eye to the origins of the wood coming into its ports, the UK Government is allowing this unscrupulous industry to profit from the international trade in this criminal activity. This complacency threatens to drive endangered species, such as the great apes, to extinction in the wild in our lifetimes.

Today Cameroon is one of the world's top six tropical timber exporters.ⁱⁱ Between half and four-fifths of this ends up in Europe. Since the beginning of 2002, Greenpeace has witnessed the arrival of nearly 30 shipments of African rainforest timber into UK ports. Much of this timber originates from companies operating in the lowland rainforest of Cameroon, part of Africa's Forest of the Great Apes.

Cameroon's ancient forest forms part of the last forest homes of endangered species such as the gorilla and the chimps. Up to three-quarters of this rainforest in Cameroon is now at risk from the bushmeat trade. Loggers and hunters travel up new logging roads to previously inaccessible areas of the rainforest to illegally kill gorillas, chimps and other wildlife. The Forest of the Great Apes is also home to around 12 million forest-dependent people whose way of life is threatened by international logging companies.

Once landed in the UK, thousands of cubic metres of illegal and destructively logged timber from this threatened forest habitat will find their way through the supply chain to builders merchants, manufacturers and retailers, and ultimately to end-users such as the construction industry and government building projects.

In early April, Greenpeace exposed UK Government complacency in terms of its own timber purchasing. Nearly two years after Tony Blair pledged that the Government would only use wood from 'legal and sustainable' sources, Greenpeace caught the Cabinet Office using more than £400,000 worth of sapele from Central and West Africa on new doors and windows.

When challenged in the House of Commons at Prime Minister's Question Time, Tony Blair claimed that all the wood used in the Cabinet Office was certified.ⁱⁱⁱ Documents leaked to Greenpeace show that this is untrue, and prove that much of the timber comes from **Vicwood-Thantry**, one of the most notorious loggers in Cameroon whose recent activities include large-scale illegal logging, implication in the bushmeat trade and illegal firearms within its concessions. Since March 2000, Vicwood-Thantry

companies have been fined well over one billion Central African Francs (US\$1.3m) for such illegal activities.^{iv}

The supply chain – Cameroon to the UK Government

Vicwood-Thantry timber is exported from Cameroon's port of Douala. The principle shipping lines are **DELMAS** and **OTAL** owned by the **Bolloré Group**.^v It arrives in the UK at the ports of Tilbury and Felixstowe.

The timber traders

International timber traders, who act as middlemen between the logging companies and timber merchants in consumer countries, are in a key position to influence the state of the world's logging industry and help clean up the timber trade. However, almost without exception, these dominant players have chosen knowingly to continue laundering timber from illegal and destructive sources to complacent consumer countries such as the UK. **NHG Timber** and **DLH** are the main timber traders of Vicwood-Thantry timber to the UK.

NHG Timber is the UK agent for Vicwood-Thantry, selling more than 40,000m³ of Vicwood-Thantry timber in 2001. Buyers of this wood included **East Brothers, Gilmore & Aitken, Glenmere Timber, Jeld-Wen joinery, John Boddy, Richard Burbidge, Timbmet** and **Whitmores Timber**.^{vi} NHG also buys from other companies operating in Central and West Africa. This includes Liberian timber from a company whose owner is been closely linked with arms-traffickers and which controls Port Harper, used for illegal arms imports.^{vii}

DLH is one of the world's largest timber traders. Evidence compiled by Greenpeace shows that a significant amount of DLH's trade originates from companies known to be involved in illegal and destructive logging practices, the creation of serious social conflict, and even human rights abuses and the funding of wars in countries like Liberia. In the UK, **Timbmet** is one of DLH's leading buyers. Vicwood-Thantry timber imported to the UK by DLH has also been tracked to **Brooks Brothers**, at **International Timber** and at **James Latham**.^{viii}

The timber merchants and manufacturers

Timbmet is one of the largest independent timber merchants in the UK. Timbmet is supplying sapele to **M&V Woodcraft**, the company manufacturing the doors for the Cabinet Office. Timbmet buys African timber including sapele, directly from companies operating in the region, but also through both DLH and NHG.

East Brothers is a merchant supplying sapele to **MH Joinery**, the company manufacturing the windows at the Cabinet Office. East Brothers buys sapele from NHG, Vicwood-Thantry's UK agent.^{ix}

Jeld-Wen is one of the world's largest manufacturers of doors and windows. The company sources sapele from Vicwood-Thantry through NHG. Jeld-Wen manufactures sapele doors which are sold to the construction industry and through timber merchants such as **Travis Perkins**.

The construction industry

The construction industry accounts for 50%-70% of all timber consumed by the UK timber industry.^x **Balfour Beatty Construction Ltd**, one of the UK's major construction companies, is managing the refurbishment of the Cabinet Office. Documents and investigation by Greenpeace reveal that although Government purchasing policy on timber is explicit, no effort was made to implement it. Instead, efforts to collect paperwork from suppliers have been made retrospectively, following Greenpeace's exposure of the scandal. Timbmet concede there is no certification on any of the timber they used despite the Prime Ministers claims to the contrary. Such complacency and deceit on the part of end users ensures that there is little incentive for the timber trade to clean up its own act.

The UK Cabinet Office – just the tip of the iceberg

According to the Interdepartmental Working Group on timber, the UK Government is responsible for upwards of 15% of UK timber procurement.^{xi} As a whole, the public sector accounts for 40% of UK construction industry business.^{xii} Clearly, the UK Government has the buying power to really change the face of industry. It also has the legislative power to crack down on illegal timber imports and corruption in the international timber trade. But positive rhetoric has not been matched with action.

Greenpeace call for action

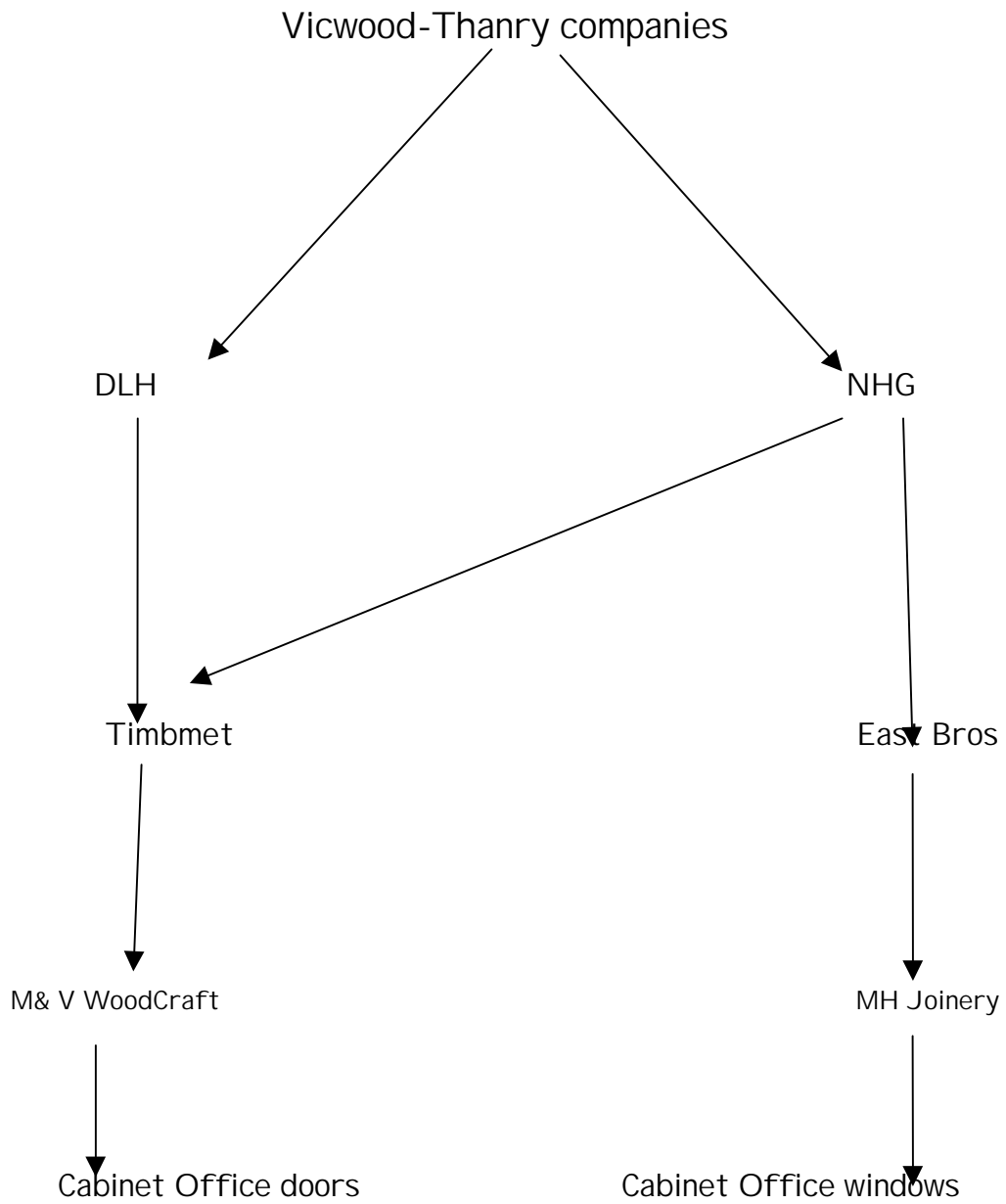
Greenpeace calls for immediate action from the UK Government:

- **stop all illegal and destructive timber imports**
amend UK Custom and Excise laws to allow the seizure of illegal and destructively logged timber shipments from ancient forests
- **get its own house in order**
live up to promises to use only legal timber from well-managed forests on all public sector projects

Greenpeace is urging governments of all countries to immediately end their role in the destruction of the world's ancient forests by committing to the following actions:

- **stop the destruction**
by stopping any further industrial activities in intact ancient forest until responsible plans for forest conservation and sustainable use have been agreed.
- **clean up the timber trade**
by ensuring that timber is produced and traded in a legal and ecologically responsible way; by refusing to trade with companies known to be operating illegally or destructively; and by demanding that all wood and wood products entering national ports must come from legal and well-managed forest operations according to high social and ecological standards.^{xiii}
- **come up with the money**
by providing funds to pay for forest conservation and sustainable development.

Vicwood-Thantry - Cabinet Office chain



ⁱ FoE (2001). *European League Table of imports of illegal tropical timber*

ⁱⁱ Global Forest Watch.

ⁱⁱⁱ 10 April 2002

^{iv} see Greenpeace (April 2002) *Forest crime file: logging profile Groupe Vicwood-Thantry destroying Cameroon's ancient forests*

^v Another firm fined repeatedly for illegal logging activities – as recently as January 2002, a Bolloré subsidiary was found guilty of falsifying its CITES export permits.

^{vi} Leaked company documents

^{vii} Global Witness (2001). *Taylor-made: the pivotal role of Liberia's forests in regional conflict*.

^{viii} Greenpeace investigations

^{ix} Leaked company documents confirm that the timber used for the windows was from Vicwood-Thantry's operations in Cameroon

^x Thomas Barnes, International Timber (Spring 2001). "Green timber purchasing: a UK Government commitment – an industry perspective: policies for the wood of the nation" in *Sustainable Building Environmental Matters*. Barnes cites industry estimate. See also WWF.

^{xi} Estimate by Bob Andrews (25 March 2002). UK Tropical Forest Forum meeting, London.

^{xii} DETR figures cited by Barnes (Spring 2001). 'Green timber purchasing: a UK Government commitment – an industry perspective. Policies for the wood of the nation' in *Sustainable Building Environmental Matters*.

^{xiii} The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is currently the only international certification and labelling system that uses globally endorsed ecological performance standards, ensures a traceable chain-of-custody from production to final consumption and brings together a broad range of environmental, social and economic stakeholder interests