

Behind closed doors: a major Greenpeace investigation into criminal imports of timber from the Amazon Rainforest to the UK high street.

During the last 10 months Greenpeace investigators using tracking devices and equipped with camcorders have been documenting the import trade of criminal timber from the heart of the Amazon rainforest to the UK. Investigators have been documenting evidence of this illegal timber through the supply chain route to its end-user. Greenpeace's investigation has uncovered a trail of criminal plywood from the Amazon rainforest to the British Museum, the furniture store Heals, the Olympia Exhibition Centre and dozens of large and small timber merchants, yards and depots around the country.

The Amaplac supply chain for example was tracked as follows:

WTK/Amaplac plywood - Manaus > Tilbury Docks > importers/traders > Timber & builders merchants (depots & yards) > Contractors & sub-Contractors > end-user (e.g. The British Museum, Olympia and building sites)

Each month more than 1400 tonnes of plywood from the Amazon rainforest ends up in the UK as cheap plywood used and trashed on building sites. The plywood has no independent certification that it's from legal or sustainable sources.

The Amaplac plywood is shipped from Manaus in the Brazilian Amazon to the London Port of Tilbury Docks. The plywood is stored in warehouses for up to one month and collected by its traders and buyers for distribution to timber merchants, yards and depots around the country.

During September 1999 to May 2000, Greenpeace mobilised investigators to document the Amaplac supply chain. They found evidence of timber companies that were regularly buying Amaplac plywood. Investigators followed lorry loads of Amaplac plywood attached with tracking devices as it left Tilbury Docks. The plywood was traced to dozens of timber merchants in London, Kent, Essex, Gloucestershire, Leicester and as far as Wales and Scotland. Several well-known timber traders and merchants had been purchasing this criminal timber. They included James Latham plc, International Plywood, Mendip Plywood, Lawsons Timber Merchants, Montague L Meyer, Caledonian Plywood and dozens more timber buyers and merchants.

In June, Greenpeace volunteers intercepted the ship MV Enif in the Thames estuary carrying a cargo of 1400 tonnes of Amaplac plywood. The volunteers occupied the ship for over 72 hours, during which time Greenpeace faxed a letter outlining Amaplac's involvement in the illegal log trade, to the UK timber industry and Amaplac's customers. Greenpeace asked them to suspend further trade with Amaplac, until the company can give assurance that its logs are from legal sources. Greenpeace also contacted the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, calling on him to review the Government's timber procurement policy and to announce

at July's G8 summit that the Government would now only buy wood from sustainable and certified sources.

Two weeks after the peaceful occupation of the MV Enif, 30 Greenpeace volunteers visited the warehouse in Tilbury where the Enif's cargo of Amaplac plywood was eventually unloaded. There, they branded the outside packaging with the words: "Protect the Amazon, Stop Criminal Timber Imports", to alert buyers and end users of plywood to its origins.

Greenpeace investigators once again, equipped with camcorders spent the next few weeks monitoring and tracking the distribution of the Amaplac plywood as it left Tilbury Docks to its end-users. The investigators traced the Amaplac plywood to the British Museum and Olympia Exhibition Centre. The investigators wasted no time in heading down to the two locations to document the illegally logged Amaplac plywood on the construction sites.

When Greenpeace contacted the British Museum and Olympia, they were unaware that they had been purchasing illegal logged timber and had been reassured that the plywood had come from sustainable sources. The Greenpeace investigation has led to both parties having to review their environmental and timber procurement policy.

In a letter dated 24th July to Greenpeace, the Managing Director of Excel Construction Limited the contractors for Olympia said, "First and foremost, I would like to thank you for bringing this matter to my attention.... you have my full commitment that this company will not knowingly purchase any further Amaplac plywood and every endeavour shall be made that all timber used is from sustainable source and properly certified".

The Eidai supply chain for example was tracked as follows:

Eidai veneer plywood - Manaus > Felixstowe > Importers/traders > Timber & builders merchants (yards and depots) > Contractors & sub-Contractors > end-user (e.g. Heals furniture store)

As part of the on-going investigation work Greenpeace also uncovered Heals, the -famous furniture store, using illegally logged timber from the Amazon supplied by Eidai, to produce a 15-drawer cabinet. Greenpeace investigators unveiled this evidence after tracking an Eidai shipment from Brazil to Felixstowe, on board the P&O ship Nedlloyd Kingston. The timber was then traced to Kala Designs in Suffolk who made the cabinets for Heals. On a previous purchase order Kala Designs and Heals had both been reassured by Eidai that the wood had come from legal sources. Heals are now having to review their environmental policy in light of this evidence.

The Greenpeace investigation into the criminal imports of Amazonian timber to the UK has had many positive results. Back in Brazil, the timber industry is describing the success of the investigations on the multinational timber companies as the 'Greenpeace Effect'.

This has led to Greenpeace meeting with both Eidai in Japan and WTK/Amaplac in Brazil to discuss how they can end their involvement in illegal and destructive logging in the Amazon rainforest and to switch to sourcing and producing timber sustainably - such as FSC approved schemes. The discussions are on going.

Greenpeace has also received written confirmation from several timber buyers that they have now suspended trade with Amaplac, until they can give assurance that their logs are from legal and sustainable sources.

They include: - James Latham plc, Hoppings Softwood Products Ltd, Premier Forest Products, Quinta Plywood, Jewson Timber Merchants, Travis Perkins, Jackson Builders Merchants, Lawsons Timber Merchants, International Plywood, Mendip Plywood Ltd, Alsford Timber, Taylor Maxwell Timber Ltd, Garstang Timber & Plywood, Masons Timber Products and Montague L. Meyer.

On July 28th, the UK Government announced a major change in its timber procurement policy and a crackdown against the use of illegally obtained wood in Government building projects. From now on, Government offices will actively seek to buy timber from sustainable sources such as those certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification schemes. This major breakthrough will send a powerful message both to the UK timber and construction industries and to their suppliers operating in the Amazon and other ancient forests, as well as give a major boost to certification schemes - such as FSC.