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It's getting easier to feel good about your furniture

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Just like every picture tells a story, so does every piece of furniture.

When the wood in your sofa, table or chair was harvested, was a forest in South America or Asia laid bare, contributing to global warming? Or did your furniture take root in a forest that was managed responsibly?

The fast-growing sustainable-furniture movement has made it possible for consumers to learn the story behind their furniture, and to help the global environment with each purchase. A new federal law banning imports of furniture made from illegally logged wood should make it even easier to buy furniture with a lower impact on the planet.

Knock on wood

Wood harvested from Honduras to Russia goes to factories around the world to become furniture that might end up in your living room. Demand has soared, with U.S. imports of furniture increasing by 78 percent from 2000 to 2006, according to the U.S. International Trade Commission.

Among total U. S. imports of wood and wood products, up to 10 percent may be illegally logged wood, says the Environmental Investigation Agency, a nonprofit group based in London and Washington, D.C. Much of the illegal logging activity results in deforestation, and the World Wildlife Fund estimates that deforestation accounts for nearly 20 percent of global greenhouse-gas emissions. Uncontrolled cutting of trees also threatens wildlife and makes it harder for indigenous populations to survive.

But under a landmark law passed by the U.S. Congress last May, importers must reveal where their wood products come from, and will face fines for using illegally harvested wood. This makes the U.S. the first country in the world to prohibit the import of wood products harvested unlawfully. Although the reporting

system for this law is still being developed, enforcement for wood furniture is scheduled to begin next summer.

Think globally, lounge locally

The new law will complement efforts already in place to protect forests in the U.S. and other countries, most notably the international Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification program. The FSC logo on a product verifies that the wood has been harvested in an environmentally responsible, socially beneficial manner.

As a response to the independent FSC program, the forest-products industry developed its own self-certification system, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), and some furniture may display the SFI logo. However, many green-building advocates and independent reviewers have concluded that the FSC program has the most comprehensive standards.

Although FSC began certifying wood in the mid-1990s, FSC furniture has become widely available only recently. Major retailers such as Ikea, Home Depot, Pottery Barn and Crate & Barrel now carry at least a few FSC products or product lines, in indoor or outdoor furniture.

Although Ikea appears to have a strong policy of using responsibly harvested wood in its products, it chooses not to use the FSC logo because Ikea wants to have only its own logo on its products. Most other retailers that sell sustainable furniture feature the FSC logo or name in product descriptions, which makes it easier for consumers to find these products.

Several locally based furniture manufacturers and retailers have also embraced certified furniture. For example, Greener Lifestyles, a maker of sustainable upholstered furniture that has a store in Ballard, uses only FSC wood in its sofa frames.

New life for local trees

In another approach to sustainable furniture, a few local producers utilize trees that need to be removed, usually because of disease or construction. Urban Hardwoods and Meyer Wells in Seattle and Coyote Woodshop on Bainbridge Island are among the woodworkers creating handsome furniture from salvaged trees. Sometimes a homeowner who has to have a sick tree taken down in the front yard eventually becomes the proud owner of a table made from that tree. Alan Vogel Furniture on Bainbridge Island makes tables from removed trees as well, but also uses recovered lumber from barns and other old buildings.

Custom furniture made from salvaged wood, or even FSC wood, can be expensive, but prices should drop as more of these items become available. For the ultimate in green furniture, of course, consider buying used at consignment stores and garage sales, or check classified ads and online exchanges.

The source of the wood is not the only consideration for buying eco-friendly furniture. For instance, you should avoid products with urea-formaldehyde glues and certain flame retardants, according to the Washington Toxics Coalition.

But since wood does grow on trees, any search for sustainable furniture needs to start with a long, hard look at wood.

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