

## **CERTIFICATION;**

### **THE CHAIN OF COMMAND FROM FOREST TO FINAL PRODUCT**

**by Paul Romeijn**

presented as invited paper at the workshop on certification of forests and forest products  
European Parliament, Espace Leopold room 01 C47, Brussels 18-19 December 1995

#### **What is the problem we are addressing?**

The issue of certification to a large extent stems from the perceived need for sustainable forest management. The current interest in sustainable forest management stems from broad-felt concern over depletion of the forest resource and is part of a growing need for global resource management. Sustainable forest management is a term that finds its origin in Germany where the term has been in use for several centuries (Hans Carl von Carlowitz, *Sylvicultura Oeconomica*, 1713). The term has since been redefined many times over, and so has the emphasis on what should be managed in a sustainable manner. Production, stock, production factors, economic output and many others items have at one time been perceived as the key factor to define sustainability of forest management.

All fora on certification have agreed that one issue is of paramount importance: gaining credibility for the certification procedure. There is no easy road to attaining credibility, as we are confronted with the apparent complexity that credibility actually means different things to different people, and to the same people in different settings, and even within one individual who might not act and purchase according to his voiced opinions, rationale or conviction. Other important questions on credibility that have risen as a result of the debate on certification are: would tropical timber producing countries attach much credibility to a European label if checked exclusively by Europeans; would German consumers accept credibility of French certification if its control is executed exclusively by French personnel; would environmental movements accept forest service dominated control systems; would consumers increase their preference for plastic substitutes when timber prices increase due to certification?

#### **How did we get here?**

Certification of forest resource management and of its products have become increasingly political issues as can be witnessed from international pressure on tropical timber producing countries to improve standards of forest management and from increasing concern about a dwindling tropical forest reserve. As a result, tropical timber producing countries have successfully argued that worldwide timber certification should be preferred over tropical timber certification. This, in turn, has led to exploration of the viability of certification as a means to improved quality of forest management in non-tropical regions.

#### **What do we certify?**

Upon introduction of the issue of certification, the first and foremost question that needs to be raised is: "Certification of what?" Certification is a form of what in Germany would be termed "begutachten", or approval. This approval implies quality, in our case of forest management and products. Again, we are faced by a tremendous complexity of what the meaning of quality approval actually is. Certification of forest management practices implies something different than certification of forest products.

If certification would deal strictly with forest management, then the quality of timber or derived final product would not of necessity be part of the criteria for certification. Yet, any member of the general public might rightly claim transparency and thus not be content with a quality mark that cannot claim anything regarding the quality of an end product on offer; eg when window-frames from certified sources would prove to be of inferior quality to those from uncertified sources.

### **Why use a chain of command approach?**

Where quality of forest management is the main denominator of eligibility for certification, consumers are burdened with insecurities. These insecurities span over a wide subject range; eg treatment of the forest products; eg painting and impregnating to improve wood-durability; eg social conditions of forest and processing workers. With a chain of command approach the quality of the entire process is certified; the entire process from forest management and forest protection to consumer product is covered.

Initial research results from a DG XI commissioned study on chain of command approach to certification in forestry indicate that there are no easy or general answers to any of these issues. However, a chain of command approach offers transparency to consumers; and it seems safe to indicate that certification schemes cannot achieve their aims without it.

### **Is forest certification different?**

Uninformed and misinformed decisions result in chaotic resource management and lead to uneconomic demands from resources; especially where a living resource cannot cope with these demands. Forests are an example of a living resource that cannot cope with present demands. Production cycles in forestry can reach up to well over 50 years and even within such cycles production factors such as soils can be depleted. Therefore, planning changes in forestry practices should take the nature of the growing stock into account. Furthermore, the bulk of timber that presently reaches the market comes from a practice labelled by some as timber-mining, to which one would be hard-pressed to coin the phrase sustainable production.

Forest derived materials encompass an extreme range of end products, as well as an extreme range of differentiation in added value, storage, shelf-life, processing, and opportunities for recycling between products. At the extremes of this range we encounter the products newsprint and a Stradivarius violin. Composition of materials within the final products further complicates this palette, as is the case with mixing timber species and sources during production of panelboard and paper, and when mixing occurs with associated materials such as glues, paints, and chemicals for wood preservation.

### **Can the forestry sector cope?**

A quote from IUCN's statement on world leadership in forestry (IUCN Forest Conservation Programme Newsletter No. 12, January 1992) provides an enlightening insight to this vast subject: "Forestry is desperately starved of resources, the activities of the forestry institutions are being made irrelevant by activities in other sectors and there is an appalling lack of consistency and coherence in our approaches to some of the world's most important resource management problems."

If we are prepared to become serious about proper management of 2,000 M ha tropical forests plus the additional acreage of temperate and boreal forests, then we should start by acknowledging that the forestry sector lacks the necessary quantity and level of skills, knowledge and technical know-how for leadership in research, institution-building, policy analysis, development management, and technology transfer. Addressing these problems implies massive investments in forestry, including training, accompanied by large-scale

dissemination of information. The current situation is that planned investments in forestry operations and programmes do not come anywhere near to attaining the critical mass required to shift this balance.

### **Can we deliver transparency?**

Vertical linkages that transcend traditional sectoral boundaries are essential to implementation of a successful and meaningful chain of command approach to certification. Vertical linkages between stakeholders are required to attain the condition of transparency. With a chain of custody approach to certification any single operator becomes dependant on all other operators for attaining and maintaining credibility, and all operators will become very selective when choosing partners. This may cause conflict with a number of free market principles.

Present responsibility of operators ends with delivery of the specific product or service. Within a chain of command this responsibility is shared between all partners of a vertical linkage. Vertical integration and dependency between operators in the chain gives rise to the need for mutual trust between all stakeholders, and such trust can only be achieved on the basis of proper communication. Sharing the responsibility for the living forest resource stretches the demands placed on all stakeholders to take responsibility and portray mutual respect.

Informed relationships with the forest resource are essential for taking concerted decisions that remain within the realm with which this resource can cope. If true, this would require an openness willingness to share information which is seldom seen. However, information infrastructure is developing at such a staggering pace that events might well overtake the natural inhibitions for information sharing.

### **How to go from here?**

In order to ascertain coherence and professionalism in certification worldwide, it is deemed appropriate to strive for regional associations of certifiers. First and foremost, such associations should aim at creating a corporate culture and codes of ethic for certifying agencies. Such associations could liaise between local and global parties concerned with certification issues without bypassing or ignoring the diversity and complexities of local and regional issues in silvicultural and stakeholders practices. They would also serve as a communications channel between certifiers and provide a platform to reach a wider public in a cost-effective manner. This type of association cannot be operated from accrediting bodies, such as FSC or others, for reasons of independence. Certification associations could greatly enhance effectiveness and impact of international fora and legislation on certification.

### **Conclusions?**

- . The issue of certification receives increasingly broad recognition as tool to enhance resource management; in politics, environmental movements, marketing and, more recently, in economics and industry.
- . The chain of custody approach is needed for certification schemes to attain their goals.
- . Legal frameworks on certification are not sufficient to guarantee wise use of the forest resource.
- . Proper implementation of certification schemes create new liaisons of hitherto unnatural partners that encompass the vertical integration along the entire chain of custody.

- . Regional associations of certifying bodies are needed to enhance transparency.
- . The forestry sector requires massive investments, both financial and intellectual, to deliver proper management of the resource.
- . The chain of command approach to certification is a tool for enhanced resource management that may well provide a novel key to unlocking the deadlock of combining sustainable economic and ecological development.

© TREEMAIL  
International forestry advisors  
Prins Bernhardlaan 37  
6866 BW Heelsum  
The Netherlands  
tel: +31 317 350100  
fax: +31 317119  
E-mail: [info@treemail.nl](mailto:info@treemail.nl)