

Certification of Forestry: A Small-scale Forester Perspective

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A perspective is presented on the role of forest certification in general and concerning small-scale forestry in particular. Certification may be viewed as a tool to communicate with consumers, as a tool to influence forest management or as a game of power and money. Market studies indicate that the end consumers have little interest in certification; the process seems to be more of an issue for some large retailers of wood products. The impact of certification on forest management and thus on the environment has not been studied extensively, and the original objective to stop devastation of tropical forests has so far failed. Certification is a new type of regulation, not based on democratic institutions. Equal treatment, correct procedures for appeal and transparency of decision processes are issues of governance yet to be addressed. The market penetration of certification is increasing, but its importance is an open question. One possible scenario is that large retailers and their large suppliers will adopt certification while the large number of smaller forest owners, wood processors and dealers abstain. Small-scale forest owners do well to develop their own standpoint vis-à-vis certification and marketing.

Key words: forest certification, market communication, forest management, governance of forestry, small-scale forestry

INTRODUCTION

Forest certification is a contentious issue. Supported by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), primarily the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and often presented by the mass media in favourable terms it has in 10 years become much discussed as a solution to many perceived forestry problems. It is so strongly supported that even raising critical questions may be not politically correct. This paper challenges some established views.

Certification of industrial processes and products is well established, e.g. the International Standards Organisation with the ISO-system. However, certification of forestry is a new phenomenon, since it deals not with the product itself (wood), but rather with forest growth, harvest and the condition of land after logs are taken away. The impact on nature and the surroundings is its focus.

Two major international systems have dominated forest certification, namely the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), backed by NGOs and the Pan-European Forest Certification (PEFC), backed by forest owners and industries. FSC and PEFC scrutinise and endorse national schemes in different countries. Table 1 reports areas covered under a number of national forest certification systems. The total area certified is well over 100 M ha and may be approaching 200 M ha or 3 – 6% of the world's 3.800 M ha of forest area. A review of over 20 certification schemes has been compiled by CEPI (2001).

Table 1. Some major certification schemes

Scheme	Area certified ^a (M ha)	Comments
FSC	31.0	International. Umbrella for national schemes
PEFC	46.3	International. Umbrella for national schemes
SFI	28.7	Sustainable Forestry Initiative. US and Canada.
American Tree Farm	10.5	United States
CSA	14.4	Canadian Standards Association
Lembaga Ekolabel	0.1	Indonesia
Total	131.0	

^a The hectare figures for FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) and PEFC (Pan-European Forest Certification) are the sums of the national schemes endorsed.

Sources: Area figures for FSC (2003), PEFC (2003) and American Tree Farm System (2003) are from web-pages, the SFI figure is from SFI (2002), the CSA figure from Abusow (2002), and the Lembaga figures from Ahmad (2003).

For non-industrial private forest owners (NIPFs), including farmers and community forestry participants, there is a need to develop an understanding about the various certification initiatives. This 'perspective' paper presents some observations and views about forest certification systems and thoughts on appropriate attitudes to forest certification by small-scale forest owners and managers.

WAYS OF VIEWING CERTIFICATION

How should certification be understood? The position is taken here that certification can be viewed in the following alternative perspectives:

Certification as a Tool for Communication with the Consumer

In this perspective, the point of departure is that forestry and the forest industry (e.g. sawmills, pulp mills and woodworking industries) feel that the forests they rely on are managed in a biologically, economically and socially sustainable way. Their problem is that the public, the market and the consumers do not know or do not trust their management systems. Certification is meant to relay the sustainability message to the public in a more credible way.

If a few suppliers (forest owners, perhaps in conjunction with some industries and dealers) introduce certification they may do so in order to gain a *competitive edge*. They aspire to a price premium using certification as a niche marketing tool. If, instead, certification is more widespread in a country, or even over a continent, it may improve the image of forestry in general in the eyes of the public. The result may be an *expansion of the whole market* for forest products.

Certification as a Tool to Improve Forest Management – a New Form of Regulation

NGOs see certification as an instrument to make forest owners and managers improve their practices to ensure biodiversity, sustainability and social responsibility, and also to control illegal logging and abusive labour practices. The mildest form of influence is by increasing awareness and knowledge in the forest sector. A stronger influence may be exerted by applying economic or social pressure on those who do not join a certification scheme.

Even though certification is often presented as a *voluntary* market instrument, it may in reality become more of a requirement. Scholars see forest certification as a new kind of law-making and regulation (Meidinger 2001 and Meidinger 2002). Instead of laws from political and democratic institutions, voluntary organisations supported by the ‘civil society’ step in as regulators. Especially in a global perspective, certification has shown this potential, largely because international democratic law-making is in its infancy hence leaving a vacuum. Meidinger (2002) argued that it is not strange that the ‘civil society’ creates ‘laws outside the political system’; ‘civil society’ has long been a source of law and the ‘tendency to equate law with the state is a very recent prejudice...’ (Meidinger 2002, p. 2).

From a political science perspective, certification can be seen as one of many measures to influence forest owners. It may, depending on its design and the situation, rely on coercion, on economic incentives or on disseminating information and creating awareness. It may also rely on a combination of these basic types of influence. The difference is the source of authority and the distribution of power. Certification is not voluntary *per se*, but it has different sources of authority than traditional public policy approaches (Cashore 2002).

Certification Viewed as a Power Game

Certification may also be seen as a vehicle for some organisations (outside the democratic system) to gain power, status and money. NGOs play a key role developing and promoting certification systems. Scientists are engaged in devising certification criteria. Consultants are hired as certifiers. Mass media give momentum to the efforts and at the same time create selling stories. A result is a shift of decision power over forestry from government agencies, forest owners and industries to other actors. With power may also follow economic resources, which can help explain the great interest the issue attracts, and the temperature of the debate at times.

It is argued here that certification is hardly on target in the sense of protecting forests threatened with devastation. Also, certification is not much asked for by end consumers. This leads to the question of where the power and thrust of the certification movement comes from. Cashore *et al.* (2003) have provided an explanation in terms of the legitimacy aspect. Proponents of the various certification systems campaign actively to achieve legitimacy among the public and among

opinion leaders. Since NGOs generally have high credibility in the public eye and since experience shows that mass media has a liking for the kind of stories they present, the visibility and thus the impact can be great.

Another factor explaining the thrust in certification is the amount of money supporting it. A prime source of funding for NGO activities and local protests, as well as development and promotion of certification, has been American foundations (Arnold 1999). FSC recently obtained an additional \$US 10 M from the Ford Foundation.

In summary, these three views of certification may all be valid. The first is primarily what the forest sector wants. The second corresponds with the wishes of many other forestry stakeholders. The third is perhaps a more realistic description of current events. These are three different views of what is happening along the wood market supply chain, which is the key arena to *seek acceptance*, to *force compliance* and to *gain power*, respectively.

OBSERVATIONS OF WHAT CONSUMERS REQUIRE

Since certification is a new mechanism there is little empirical evidence of its function, impact and effectiveness. Meidinger (2002, p.18) has argued that most research into certification is in hypothetical-deductive form. This section presents some observations from recent studies on the market of consumer products.

Forest Certification and European Consumers

Certification is said to be *market-driven*, in the name of the end consumers, i.e. those who finally use the wooden products, the paper and so on. However, the impetus for certification may be more correctly described as *organisation-driven*, that is, driven by environmental NGOs (ENGOS), forest owner organisations, forest corporations, professional consulting firms and retailers.

What do the consumers want and think? This question may be examined in terms of attitudes and behaviour in markets. Several studies indicate that the environmental argument ranks third or fourth place for the customer – after product, price and quality (e.g. see Forsén 2002). Forsberg and Olsson (2001) found that British consumers (at B & Q stores and Wickes) as well as Swedish customers primarily base purchase decisions on product, price and quality. But they also want the material to be produced in a sustainable way. They have a notion of Scandinavian forestry as being managed sustainably. Many think certification and labelling are desirable and important. But most consumers do not know about FSC or PEFC and they are not interested in the details. Many say they just want to know where the wood is coming from.

A recent study by Ryhn (2002) on the Swedish market found that:

- Price, quality and appearance are the most important factors in decisions to purchase wood products. For males price comes first.
- Awareness of brands or trademarks is low, but it increases with the level of processing. It is low for construction wood, but higher for cupboards and wooden floor materials.

- Consumers care little about brands. They are interested in the origin of the timber.
- Consumers largely trust the dealers concerning product quality.

A recent study explored the attitudes and practices of purchasers employed by furniture stores and chains. Knowledge levels about forest certification were found to be low. Purchasers claimed they want to have an environmental profile, 'but not much implies that they are trying to create one' (Fredriksson and Westin 2002, summary page). The interest to find forest certified furniture seemed low, both among the dealers and among the customers.

What implications do these studies have concerning the role for certification? People do *not* look for certificates or labels. They look for product quality, appearance and price. But they want forestry practices to be environmentally sound.

A Possible Explanation to the Paradox

The attitudes of consumers may be somewhat of a paradox. People do really want human activities to be sustainable. They will buy wood products if they believe these come from sustainable sources. But they do not want to go into detail. If using wood is perceived as being acceptable to society, then they are happy to use wood. Then they look at price and quality.

The critical factor for the wood suppliers may thus be that there is a public image of wood being acceptable. *Acceptance* may be what is sought. Once wood is accepted – or some kinds or origins of wood are accepted – then *green* arguments do not assist in selling larger quantities. This may explain observations of market effects of certification. Certification does not appear to lead to any substantial price premium, at least not in the long run. The absence of a price premium may be seen as supporting the point that end consumers have low willingness to pay for certification. However, certification may be needed anyway (Kärnä *et al.* 2001, pp 164-165), or at least some kind of product declaration may be needed, so as to *get over the threshold of public acceptance*. Once over the threshold, traditional product arguments and marketing strategies dominate. This of course raises the question of 'how high is the threshold?'

A preliminary conclusion as concerns certification as a tool of communication may be that the dominant systems of today, particularly FSC and PEFC, may be more detailed and more complicated than consumers want. Information about the origin of the wood may be sufficient to satisfy most people.

Chain of Custody and Labelling

Considerable efforts are made today to certify the *chain of custody*, i.e. to guarantee that each piece of wood actually comes from a certified and identified patch of forest land. This complicated arrangement is in little demand from end consumers, as indicated by the studies cited above.

A visible sign of certification (and chain-of-custody) is to have labels on the packages of planks, pulp or paper. Both FSC and PEFC have created logos intended for labelling. However, the future for such labels is unclear. One reason is that large retailers including B & Q and Ikea prefer their own brands and logos on the products. Further, these gigantic dealers are representative of the type most likely to ask for certification. The tendency for influential dealers to have their own brands is a general fact in retailing.

INFLUENCE OF CERTIFICATION ON FOREST MANAGEMENT

It is difficult to judge the impact of certification, seen as a tool to influence forest management. The idea of certification was launched in the early 1990s by NGOs primarily to influence rough and illegal forestry practices in the tropics, where international negotiations were not capable of addressing deforestation (Meidinger 2001, p. 11). Not successful there, the NGOs moved the pressure for certification to Europe and North America. Primarily, pulp and paper mills were in focus. However, since each pulp mill in Scandinavia may have over 10,000 suppliers of wood, certification of the inflow of raw material was difficult to handle. So the NGOs switched focus to solid wood and sawmills (Cashore *et al.* 2003, Klingberg 2002).

Certification is Off Target

Taking an overall view of certification, FAO (2001, page xii) concluded that:

The area of certified forests continues to increase and is now estimated to be roughly 90 million ha. Nonetheless, this represents only about 2 percent of the world's forest area and, notably, most certified forests are located in a limited number of temperate countries, not in tropical countries for which concern about unsustainable timber harvesting practices is greatest.

Most of the areas of certified forest are concentrated to Europe and North America. Losses of forest cover are concentrated to other parts of the world. Hence it may be concluded that certification so far has missed the prime target of forest protection.

Compliance with Certification is Not Proof of Improvement in Forest Management

Actual effects of certification on forest management have not been widely studied. The fact that forest management complies with the rules and criteria of a certification scheme does not prove that certification has had an impact. It may be that the management of the forest was of a high standard even before certification procedures commenced, or would have been modified during the same period anyway. The direct effects on the ground in certified areas are little known.

The rapid certification processes in some countries rather proves the point that forest management was judged by the certifiers to already be acceptable. The large forest corporations in Sweden had about 10 M ha certified quickly by FSC in the late 1990s. Also, 3.6 M ha in eight state forests in Poland were quickly certified by FSC, leaving little room for an assumption of improvements made due to certification (FSC 2003). The PEFC certification of 21.9 M ha of forests in Finland from December 1999 to December 2000 obviously confirmed an acceptable state rather than being the fruit of years of progressively improving forest management (PEFC 2003). Further research is required to understand the impacts of certification on the environment, the economy and social matters.

Indirect Effects Versus Direct Effects of Certification

The fact that certification has not (at least not yet) broken through in the tropics and the fact that direct effects in certified areas are unclear, and may be absent, are not enough to discount the impact of certification. A major mechanism of influence may be the indirect effects. There has been considerable public debate and pressure

concerning certification for 10 years. This can be assumed to have raised the level of awareness and knowledge of forest owners and managers, promoting a general tendency to greater environmental adaptation. This indirect influence could possibly be the most important lasting effect of the certification movement.

Chicken or the Egg?

To complicate the cause-and-effect discussion further, it may be argued that certification in itself was launched and gained momentum because of a widespread and growing interest in environmental matters. Forest management had been under heated debate at least since the early 1980s. In Sweden a new *Forest Act* went into effect January 1, 1994. It was a product of its time, including stronger environmental facets than the previous law. Changes in forest practices had been going on for at least a decade at that time. Similarly, certification may have added force to changes, but it may be that certification was a product of changed values in the scientific community, among forest practitioners and among mass media and the public. To ascribe all changes to new laws and regulations (whether democratic or civil) would be an exaggeration. The extent to which certification has brought about change and the extent to which it is a product of changes is an open issue.

A GAME OF POWER AND MONEY

This third perspective on certification raises some issues of relevance to forest managers, e.g. legal aspects and administrative costs. Since so called *third-party certification* – i.e. with other than buyers and sellers involved (FSC and PEFC are examples) – is beginning to play a role as regulation outside the government systems, this calls for securing equal treatment of all, stability of the systems and power allocation. It also creates normative problems concerning the relationship between forest certification and democracy, as pointed out by Meidinger (2002).

Issues of Governance

The larger the role for certification and the stronger the concentration to a few systems (i.e. the closer to a monopoly situation), the more urgent it is to penetrate matters of governance, such as:

- Where does the power get its legitimacy?
- Is the authority acquired a problem from a democratic point of view?
- Do the forest owners have legal protection and assurance of equal and fair treatment?

Another issue is the accreditation of certifiers (Klingberg 2003). Who is accountable to whom? How do the consumers know whether the certification criteria are based on sound science or on assumptions and myths? Also, the current restructuring of FSC rules to make national criteria comply more closely with the international rules illustrates a problem of decision levels in the sense that local processes lose influence (NIS 2002). This is counter to the ambition that local actors shall have an important role.

A Trend Towards More Complicated Certification Rules

Certification schemes – after their initial honeymoons – have to develop their rules and criteria as more knowledge and experience is gained. Both FSC and PEFC have been revised. In what direction will they develop? In the beginning rules and criteria were by necessity schematic and blunt. But forests are diversified and the aim is *not* to diminish variations. On the contrary, diversification is a goal, which rather calls for diversification of the rules. Problems, challenged ‘verdicts’, appeals and conflicts lead to modifications, revisions and amendments. One example is that rules for set-asides (or *reserves*) will likely be modified. In southern Sweden, scientists ask for promotion of forests which are not denser (as the certification criteria aspire) but rather more open, this being the form of forests in many places in earlier times (as noted by Nilsson *et al.* 2001). Also in middle Sweden new evidence reveals that due to a history of cattle herding, open grazed forests were common. These and other signals from scientists indicate that some of the certification criteria are not only blunt but even arbitrary, set up quickly when the certification system was designed and negotiated.

Critical observations will call for unavoidable modifications. The rules will be successively more diversified and elaborate. Signs of this are apparent, with FSC restructuring its national standards, which have become ‘too national’. The Swedish FSC standard has to be put back in line with the general principles and rules. This causes tensions for FSC. According to inside sources, this recent development may make the national standards more complicated and difficult to understand (NIS 2002). This development toward more elaborate rules is similar to what is facing government regulations in other fields. The construction field is an example with successively more elaborate building codes (Klingberg 1980). They become so detailed that they may finally be difficult to manage.

Certification Schemes Take Time and Money

A downside of certification work is that ‘FSC has consumed a large proportion of the working time of many forest NGOs who previously had given their attention to a wide range of ways to resolve forest conflicts.’ (WRM 2001, p. 9). Much time and money have been spent on discussions, negotiations and analyses of the various schemes. This has been the case not only for the NGOs, but also for other actors, including forest owners and managers. One may ask if the resources used have benefited the environment. It may be that the conflicts perceived have turned consumers to using plastics, steel and aluminium instead of recyclable wood, with probably negative environmental impacts overall. On the other hand, a positive effect of the processes may be an increased awareness and a dissemination of information about sustainable forest management.

Due to the increasing complexity of rules and criteria, it may be predicted that the costs of administration and development of the certification systems will rise. As a consequence, the NGOs may have a choice to make: how much longer should they devote efforts to forest certification if their scheme does not gain aspired dominance? Forest owners and industries will face a choice also, about how much longer to devote resources to certification if the end consumers prefer less complicated market messages.

Large Actors Dominate the Game

Small forest owners may note that certification to a considerable extent is a game for large actors on the market. In Sweden, the large forest corporations made a deal with the FSC, thus opening the way for NGO-led certification in Europe. This came about after market pressure, coordinated by WWF, from primarily large British retailers such as B & Q and Sainsbury, (Cashore *et al.* 2003). Is certification more suited to large enterprises than small?

A study of a large entrepreneur in the electric business in Sweden indicates that environmental certification (in this case ISO 14001) is something suited for, and pushed by, the largest actors on the market. Smaller actors find that the rather cumbersome certification system is not adapted to their small-scale operations, nor does it appear to them as necessary (Alriksson and Heinola 2002). Since the adverse environmental impacts of small-scale forestry are claimed to be smaller and less threatening than of industrial forestry, a less detailed certification scheme may be warranted. The Finnish certification on a regional level indicates a possible route to follow.

POSSIBLE FUTURE DIRECTION OF CERTIFICATION

There has been a move from just one system in the early 1990s to several systems today, reflecting slowly increasing market penetration of certification schemes. The importance of certification on the market in the future is as yet an open question. It may be subject to the paradox of *‘the more “successful” is certification, the less its importance’*; if certification becomes widespread and thus becomes common practice, then the ‘competitive edge’ certification offers may be decreased. Four alternative scenarios may be sketched for the role of certification on the wood market as in Figure 1.

Number of certification systems	Extent of certification penetration	
	Limited	Considerable
Several	Today	Likely in future. Decreasing importance? Or will certification become ‘compulsory’?
Just one	Early 1990s	Monopolisation by one system

Figure 1. Matrix of four scenarios for the penetration of certification

One possible future outcome is that certification achieves a limited penetration of the market, in the order of say 3 – 15% of the traded volumes, cf. about 3% currently. At the other extreme, a certificate may be required for most wooden products in trade.

The number of certification schemes is a scene of conflict. There may arise one dominating scheme (as is the ambition of FSC), or a number of different schemes, such as PEFC, SFI (Sustainable Forest Initiative in USA) and CSA (Canadian Standards Association). One possible outcome is that as certification grows, tensions and interest will decrease, and the process will play a more marginal role in the

future. The consumers will 'get over the threshold' of viewing wood as 'acceptable'. And then the consumer will – as usual – direct their attention to the product, price and quality.

A Diversified Market Scenario in Europe and North America

Scenarios may be elaborated for the future role of certification in relation to types of timber suppliers. The large dealers pushing certification as a competitive tool (B & Q and Sainsbury in UK, Home Depot and Lowe in US) may continue to do so. These companies deal only with large suppliers, such as AssiDomän and Finnforest. Final customers seldom ask for labels. But the big dealers figure on developing this as a market argument – to strengthen their image. This scenario is supported by a study from Worcester University (Wallberg 2001).

Large sawmills, owned by the forestry corporations (producing about 15% of the Swedish sawn wood) use their certification as a marketing argument. However, independent (privately owned) sawmills (accounting for about 70 % of the sawmill capacity) normally do not use certification and several claim they do not find market demand for it (Boström and Westh 2002, Norberg 2003). Many small dealers and woodworkers do not ask the sawmills for certification, because their customers do not. These observations may lead to a diversified outcome, as illustrated in Figure 2. As illustrated in this figure, it is important to clearly understand the different supply chains within the forest sector and which are most in need of and suitable to certification.

Size of supplier (forest owners, sawmills)	Use of certification and labels	
	Little	Very much
Large (e.g. forest corporations)	Bulk producers	AssiDomän, Finnforest
Small (often non-industrial private)	Most small	Some niche manufacturers with a special 'green' profile

Figure 2. Matrix of possible roles of certification by type of supplier

The Need for Labelling Versus a General Acceptance

Once certified, forest owners, whether family foresters, corporations, municipalities, churches or state agencies, may publicly announce their status. This improves their image and it may help improve the image of forestry in general.

For marketing of certified timber, it may be necessary to have a label on each piece of wood, on each plank, on each package of moulding and on each chair. The right to such labelling requires the dealer to prove that the pieces of wood in the product actually come from certified forests. The wood has to be traced through the sawmill and the subsequent steps of processing. The wood has to be separated from non-certified wood. This chain-of-custody control requires considerable administration, for which computer consultants are developing intricate systems (Sörvik 2002).

Whether the consumers will demand labelling and thus justify the cost of chain-of-custody is not yet known. If the public view of forestry in a country or in a larger

area (such as the Nordic countries or all of Europe) is favourable then a declaration of origin may be adequate.

The general outfall of the current debate, of certification processes, of government activities, evaluations, scientific research on sustainability and biodiversity will determine the potential importance of labelling. Practices in the forests are influenced by certification, and so is the public perception thereof.

A Reservation: Organisations May Overtake the Market

The reasoning above rests mainly on indications of lack of interest in certification by the end consumer. However, organisations may intervene. Political bodies such as municipalities have decided to demand certified wood in their procurements. The motivation may be a concern over forest sustainability – or it may be a political will to appear environmentalist in the eyes of the voters. Such organisational interventions may underpin a stronger position for certification than consumer-based indications suggest.

Another factor may be the activities of so called ‘buyers groups’, i.e. cartel-like cooperation of dealers demanding a particular type of certification as a condition for purchase of wood. If such groups come to represent a high share of a market, those selling wood may be forced to commit themselves to a certification scheme. Such buyers, however, normally do not buy from small-scale producers.

The Role of Certification in Third World Countries

What is discussed in this article is mainly relevant for the so-called developed world. In the Third World, certification may be a powerful tool to influence forest management and counteract illegal logging. Certification may be applicable there in the absence of effective government tools and of a tradition of sustainable forest management. However, the applicability is limited by the fact that much of the forest devastation in the tropics has domestic causes, such as a need for farmland. Also, a high proportion of tropical wood is used by local people for fuel. Certification is hardly applicable on the local fuel market. The role of certification is – and reasonably should be – different in different countries, due to their diverse institutions, traditions and cultures.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Certification may be a strong tool of communication and influence, or it may just be an administrative burden with limited impact. Its role and use in the future is not an issue for only a few organisations and market actors to determine. It is a broader issue for many authorities (national and super-national) to watch. Certification has to do with legal protection, equal treatment, transparency, avoiding unfair practices and related matters. And it is an issue for the final consumer and for the forest owners, regardless of the size of their holdings. From the somewhat critical issues and questions raised in this paper, it might be concluded that the author is opposed to certification. This is not the case, but an intended message in this article is that the sound development of certification requires that issues raised are addressed openly and that further knowledge about the appropriate role and the limitations of certification is sought.

To what extent, in what geographical areas and in what shape and form certification will find its place, is yet too early to say. Non-industrial private forest owners ought to shape their own standpoint or platform concerning the future governance of forestry. Depending on if their forest practices are biologically sustainable and socially acceptable and if that is known in a credible way, they may have an opportunity to influence and choose certification practices.

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