

Title: ' just the answer - the WWF '

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The closures debate was re-ignited in 2007 as environmental concerns caught up with long-standing quality arguments. In 2008, we will see this trend continue as wineries and retailers come under increasing consumer pressure to improve their eco credentials and the cork industry improves its 'green' offering.

The WWF (Worldwide Fund for nature), the global conservation organisation, has long championed the environmental benefits of natural cork closures and here outlines the reasons why and the initiatives it is developing with the wine industry to protect the Mediterranean cork forests.

Why does WWF consider the closures issue to be so important?

The cork oak landscapes that cover around 2.7m hectares in seven countries around the Mediterranean (Portugal, Spain, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Italy and France) are part of one of the world's top 25 biodiversity hotspots and one of the last remaining examples of a human/nature-balanced system.

These ecosystems are currently under threat for a number of reasons, most importantly their decreasing 'economic value'. This is due, for the main part, to the wine industry's gradual move away from natural cork to alternative closures.

What are the consequences of decreasing demand for natural cork closures?

If the amount of natural cork demanded by the wine industry continues to decrease, the people who live and work in the cork oak forests and earn their living from the cork trade will be forced to abandon their economic activities. Human desertification leads to physical desertification - when forests are then not managed properly they are prone to over-grazing, conversion to other uses, drought, fires and soil erosion, all of which can result in desertified land very quickly.

In Iberia for example, where most of the cork land is privately owned, without a concerted effort, there is a risk of a massive rural exodus from the cork oak landscapes or even conversion to other uses. Forest fires are the primary outcome of forest abandonment and already in Portugal thousands of hectares of forest land is destroyed as a result of fires every year.

How is cork more environmentally friendly than other types of closure?

Cork is a natural and renewable resource. Many people have the misconception that cork trees are cut down during the production process; but this is not the case. Cork extraction is actually one of the most environmentally friendly harvesting processes in the world - not a single tree is cut during the cork harvest. The bark of the tree is stripped every 9 to 12 years and grows again, thus enabling trees to age up to 400 years.

What is the WWF action?

The WWF is working to encourage the wine industry to make natural cork its closure of choice, and demanding FSC cork to their suppliers, so preserving cork forests, which are a vital defence against desertification. Although there are a variety of closures currently on the market, corporate responsibility means the social and environmental impact of business practices must be taken into consideration. Therefore, cork being a natural closure, from a renewable source and benefiting from being recyclable and biodegradable, should feature strongly on the agenda.

The WWF is also driving best practice on the ground to encourage improvements on the cork production side, by working with the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) and different stakeholders to establish and promote the FSC certification of cork oak forests and cork industries. Such concepts will enable producers to provide FSC-certified corks for consumer recognition.

What is the FSC?

The Forest Stewardship Council is an international, non-governmental membership organisation founded by industry, social and environmental stakeholders to develop a consistent, comprehensive and reliable set of third-party certification standards for responsible forest management.

FSC certification provides a recognisable and universal assurance that the forest products come from a responsibly managed source. This gives buyers and consumers the confidence that best practices are being employed.

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Is FSC cork available now?

Yes, FSC cork is already available. There is real international momentum behind FSC cork now, as an increasing number of wineries are showing interest in the FSC. Currently there are 16,000 hectares of FSC cork forest and by the end of 2008 this will have more than trebled to 50,000 hectares.

Does FSC mean anything to consumers?

An increasing number of wood and paper products on the market today have FSC certification as consumer awareness keeps growing. Ikea, B&Q and Sainsbury's are all stocking FSC goods.

What about cork quality?

The WWF is aware of the issue and realises that quality of the wine in the bottle is compromised by cork quality issues. The WWF is pushing the cork industry to improve cork stopper quality and demonstrate the achieved process to the wine industry.

Are wineries showing a commitment to the cause?

WWF has received positive feedback from wineries across Europe on a new programme for 2008. Some of these wineries have already signed a commitment guaranteeing to use natural cork for at least 70% of their bottled production in 2008, by registering at: www.panda.org/mediterranean/cork. We expect more wineries to join the programme this year.

What is on WWF's cork agenda for 2008?

The WWF will increase cooperation with wineries, helping those willing to go for FSC certification. FSC certification will become a bigger issue in 2008, promoting and engaging all actors for FSC certification through the whole chain from production to consumption. Meanwhile, the WWF will continue to encourage natural cork producers to improve product quality so that wineries - and consumers - stay committed to natural cork.