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We should not put a stop to the stopper...

Over 15 billion cork stoppers are produced every year and sold worldwide to the wine industry. These stoppers are processed from bark harvested from cork oak woodlands that have existed in the Western Mediterranean for thousands of years.

The use of cork for bottle stoppers comprises almost 70% of the total value of the cork market. The wine industry thus plays a vital role in maintaining the economic value of cork and the cork oak forests.

Alternative wine stoppers

The increase in the market share of alternative wine stoppers, specifically plastic stoppers and screw tops, could reduce the economic value of cork lands therefore leading to conversion to other uses, abandonment, degradation, and finally loss of one of the best and most valuable examples of a human–nature balanced system.

Impacts to local communities & the environment

As the forests have an economic value to local communities, people care for the forests. This helps maintain their environmental values as well as reducing the risk of fires and desertification.

Worst Case Scenario

Unless the commercial value of cork stoppers is maintained, and especially demand for cork stoppers, there is a risk that the Western Mediterranean cork oak landscapes will face an economic crisis, an increase in poverty, an intensification in forest fires, a loss of irreplaceable biodiversity and an accelerated desertification process within less than 10 years, according to the worst case scenarios.

Economic importance

Cork has a wide variety of uses, from clothes to insulation and even rocket technology, and important international and national markets. The cork markets represent an annual export trade value of around US \$ 329 million.

Despite the variety of cork products, however, bottle stoppers drive the cork industry, as they represent almost 70 % of the total cork market value.

Cork oak woodlands provide employment and guarantee the survival of local communities and their cultural heritage. More than 100,000 people in the seven Mediterranean cork producing countries depend directly and indirectly on the cork economies.

In North Africa, the cork economy may represent an opportunity for poverty reduction and socio-economic development.

The natural values of cork appeal to current green and ethical consumer trends, such as the dramatic increase in the sales of fair-trade products in the UK. The Fair Trade brand announced last year that UK Fair Trade sales topped £140m for 2004 - a 51% rise since 2003.

Environmental values

Cork oak landscapes support a wealth of biodiversity, including globally endangered species.

Cork oak landscapes are mosaics of habitats comprising diverse mixed forest types and rich pastures, shaped by people for thousands of years. They sustain one of the highest levels of plant biodiversity among forest habitats and a rich fauna including some of the most threatened species in the Mediterranean. They also play an important role for migratory birds.

Cork oak landscapes are particularly well adapted to the harsh Mediterranean climate and soil conditions and play a vital role in the prevention of soil erosion and desertification.

No trees are cut down when cork is harvested. Cork is obtained by harvesting the outer layer of bark from cork oak. This professional harvesting technique does not harm the tree.

Man has shaped cork oak forests into sustainable systems and they are an ecologically optimal asset superior to any other agro-forestry system.

Cork stoppers are biodegradable and can be recycled into other products. They have low environmental impact compared to aluminium and plastic stoppers.