

How I as a consumer can protect tropical rainforests

Every person can – and should try to – make a small, personal contribution to the protection of the climate, thus helping save the rainforests of this world. Every consumer can individually answer the question of whether the chaise lounge in the backyard has to be made from tropical wood, and whether it would be better to go without tropical wood and to use notebooks and toilet paper made from recycled paper.

Vegetarian diet

On average, each German eats 62 kilograms of meat per year, which is 170 grams per day, more than double the amount recommended by nutrition experts. Over the course of their lives, German citizens will eat an average of 1,094 animals: four cows or calves, four sheep, 12 geese, 37 ducks, 46 turkeys, 46 pigs, and 945 chickens. This does not even include the vast number of fish and other seafood animals.



Eating less meat protects rainforests.

But what does our meat consumption have to do with the destruction of tropical rainforests?

Vast areas of tropical rainforests are cleared for cattle farming, and also for growing the feed (soy, grain) for the cattle. The production of one kilogram of meat requires 7 to 16 kilograms of grain. In the same period, 200 kilograms of tomatoes or 160 kilograms of potatoes could be harvested on the area necessary to grow the grain.

Our meat consumption should be urgently realigned. This does not mean that everyone has to become a vegetarian immediately; after all, some five to six million vegetarians already live in Germany. But going without meat one day a week would be a good start.

Fair trade

TransFair – trade, not aid. The nonprofit association TransFair started its work in Germany in 1992 with the goal of supporting disadvantaged farming families in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and improving their living and working conditions through fair trade. The association is supported by 39 member organizations and sponsors from the areas of development work, church, environment, social work, consumer protection, cooperatives, and education. TransFair does not trade goods itself. Rather, the association awards its seal to fairly traded products. TransFair is thus not a brand, but its seal distinguishes products that have been traded at defined fair conditions.



Tea package with the Fair Trade seal.

Alternatives to tropical wood

Does the chaise lounge in the backyard have to be made from tropical wood? Or the parquet floor in the living room? Certainly not. If you go without tropical wood, you are actively protecting rainforests without the slightest loss in your quality of life. And a living tree is always more valuable than a dead piece of wood in the shape of a chaise lounge. Tropical wood is often less expensive than qualitatively comparable domestic woods, because the trees in rainforests can be plundered “for free.” Wood from European forests is more expensive because its price includes the costs of forest maintenance and management. These cost aspects are missing from wood from tropical rainforests.

Numerous woods from European forests can be used as substitutes for tropical wood. Therefore, people can go without tropical woods without reservation.

- Lawn chairs and tables made of domestic locust wood are just as weatherproof as lawn furniture made of teak. Locust wood (*Robinia*) is increasingly gaining acceptance as an alternative to tropical wood. Like many tropical woods, locust wood is very dense (considerably denser than oak), naturally highly durable (making it good for use outdoors), and extremely resistant to wood-destroying insects and fungi.
- An entertainment center made of teak is also unnecessary. Black walnut, alder, sycamore, cherry, and linden make it easy to forget teak.
- The window frames of a Bavarian half-timbered house do not have to be built from meranti. Larch is a domestic wood that is highly suitable for window construction. Heavy oak wood can also be used outdoors because it is weather-resistant; this is not true of the common beech.
- Low-maintenance wood floors are often laid in public buildings. Wenge is often used for this purpose; it is a hard, low-maintenance wood from tropical Africa and has a distinctive look. An alternative to wenge is locust wood, which is impervious to cleaning agents and therefore ideally suited for floors. The price of locust parquet is relatively low.
- Red ironwood has been and is still used for coastal protection and hydraulic engineering applications, shoreline stabilization, bridges and jetties, lock gates, and pier attachments. The only substitute for red ironwood in hydraulic engineering is locust wood.

The FSC seal

If tropical wood has to be used, then at least it should be tropical wood that comes with a certificate. There are numerous tropical wood certificates indicating that the woods did not originate from illegal overexploitation, but from an ecologically and economically sustainable, controlled region. It is difficult for consumers to verify whether every certificate is backed up by what it promises. The German Federal Research Centre for Forestry and Forest Products and various environmental associations currently recommend the only “reliable” certificate for tropical woods: the FSC seal.



The FSC seal.

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) was founded in 1993 as a global, independent nongovernmental and nonprofit organization by forest owners and representatives from the timber industry, social movements, and environmental groups. The FSC's mission is to promote environmentally

sound, socially beneficial, and economically prosperous management of the world's forests. The FSC commissions independent agents to monitor compliance with FSC standards locally and during the entire processing chain all the way to the end consumer.

Recycled paper

Paper consumption has increased sixfold since 1950. On average, each German uses 240 kilograms of paper per year, of which about 70 percent is recycled paper. Today, every fifth tree worldwide is processed into paper. Entire forests are logged to manufacture virgin wood fiber. The use of recycled paper offers only advantages:

- Forests are protected.
- Energy, water, and chemicals are saved.
- Less carbon dioxide is released into the atmosphere.
- Less waste is produced.

In Germany, 2.5 billion rolls of toilet paper are used every year, and the proportion of recycled paper is only about 30 percent. This is an odd trend, since toilet paper in particular does not have to consist of three- or four-ply bright white virgin fiber pulp. Recycled paper is hygienic because during production all bacteria and germs are killed through heating to 100°C and contaminants are removed; it thus satisfies the packaging recommendations of the German Federal Ministry for Health.



Toilet paper made from recycled paper.

The Blue Angel

The Blue Angel is 25 years old, making it the world's oldest eco-label. People buying paper products should look for the Blue Angel. Paper products with the Blue Angel on the packaging meet a list of criteria that take into account important environmental and health aspects that are rigorously tested:

- The paper fibers consist of 100 percent recycled paper
- Reduced waste volume
- Reduced consumption of resources (wood, energy, water)
- Reduced waste water production
- Banning of specific substances (for example, optical brighteners or colorants that are carcinogenic, mutagenic, or toxic for reproduction)
- Limiting of specific substances (for example, formaldehyde)



The Blue Angel eco-label.

The Blue Angel is awarded by the German Institute for Quality Assurance and Certification in cooperation with the German Federal Environment Agency.

Notebooks made from recycled paper

About 25 years ago, notebooks that were not made from recycled paper were frowned upon. Today things are different. Notebooks made from recycled paper currently cover only about 5 to 10 percent of the total demand (about 200 million notebooks throughout Germany).

Unfortunately, only about 20 percent of stores carry notebooks made from recycled paper. As regards paper quality, notebooks must meet several requirements.

They must have:

- the right ink fastness, that is, it must be possible to write on the paper with pencil, ink, ballpoint pen, and markers
- a smooth surface
- little to no transparency



Notebook made from recycled paper.

These requirements are easily met by all recycled paper. The quality of some recycled paper is even superior to that of paper with virgin pulp. The opinion that elementary school students cannot write on recycled paper neatly using a pen is unproven. Recycled paper is also not just grayish-yellow, but white, and natural substances are used to color the paper white.

The Blue Angel on notebooks guarantees paper made from 100 percent recycled paper. Notebooks with the Blue Angel are available in large department stores and in stationery shops with a good assortment of paper. When consumers purchase notebooks, they should insist on the Blue Angel to protect tropical forests. Products made from recycled paper are offered for all areas in which paper is needed (office stationery, notebooks, writing paper, toilet paper).