

Speaker: **Constance McDermott – James Martin Senior Fellow in Forest Governance, Oxford**

Start time: **00:07**

End time: **12:16**

CONTENT

0:07

Ok. As is clear from this, the 20th century was a time of an absolute explosion of standards. There is a standard now for just about everything. From electrical plugs, to saving the forest. We need new ideas for the 21st century. And please may they not all evolve into standards. I am saying this not just because there are too many - we have quite a few already thank you. But, because maybe something a little more profound than that and that will say actually something more profound than say harmonising can achieve - because a lot of people say well the problem is you just got to harmonise. I think there's something else going on here. And I am going to give the example of forest and wood products. But a lot of what I have to say I think has relevance beyond this. Ok, why.

0:58

Well first of all, we've all heard something about tropical deforestation that we've got problems here. That somewhere in the world forests are disappearing at the rate of x number of football fields per minute. Of for those of us who don't really do football very well, 13 million hectares per year. And this is a problem for a number of reasons which some of you may know, for example global warming. We're thinking that something like 12 to 20% of greenhouse gas emissions that humans have caused comes from forest loss. Its driven extinction of thousands of plant and animal species. It's displaced indigenous people. Its lead to loss of livelihood for a lot of the world's poorest people. But it's also created new economic opportunities. You know for the palm and soy and beef etc. that have been created. An instead it's important to remember this.

1:49

Now, I want to talk first about a new idea that emerged in the late 1980's early 1990's. And this is forest certification. And the idea here is how can we encourage people to do better management of their forests and also have local people get some benefit from it. Ok, so I don't know how many of you have heard of forest certification but maybe you might of recognised some of these labels. For example; Fairtrade - how many of you had no Fairtrade or seen a Fairtrade label, OK, wow a lot, ok. Well, so, you might have some idea how that works. You often see it say on coffee or other products that you find in the supermarket.

2:30

And what it basically signifies is that the farmer that produced that coffee got a decent price, they got a fair price for the coffee. So when you buy a Fairtrade label it means that the farmer gets some befits from it. All your money isn't just going to the brand name whatever it is. But it's actually going to the farmer too. Well the idea of forest certification is very similar - so I put up one example, there's more than one, of a forest certification scheme - the forest stewardship council with the tree and check mark. You might of seen this label too. It's on let's say toilet paper, it's on printing product, it's on garden beaches. And what that signifies is that if you but that product - this didn't lead to deforestation. And it didn't lead to degradation either. An the workers were treated right, and the community around the forest wasn't harmed by it.

3:17

Now this was actually revolutionary because until that point - if you care about these things and you go into the store and you say I don't want to buy a wood product that's destroying the forest, your lost because there's nothing you can do about it. You can tell one product from another. Unless you buy it maybe from the farmer down the road, but other than that you just don't know. So this was revolutionary and I thought it was pretty exciting. I got involved early on. I was working in California, I was working in British Columbia in Canada on this and I worked in other countries and internationally. And a lot of great things happened it was a really interesting idea - but, of course there's a but, I was noticing some serious problems I couldn't quite ignore. Or some issues or limitations.

3:59

Alright, one thing was, that people may not realise, it's a lot easier to get certified if you're a large scale industrial tree plantation, than if you're say a family forest - wood lot. No this was bothersome to some of us because we actually wanted to kind of support the small guy, or at least by buying a certified product we didn't want to squeeze him out of the market place. But actually there are other reasons why this is important, that also people may not always realise. Small producers are really important in many countries in terms of the amount of wood that they produce. So this is true in the US, this is true in Europe, its true in many countries; let's take the example of Indonesia.

4:40

There are hundreds and thousands of small producers of wood in Indonesia. 80% of Indonesia's very substantial timber production goes for domestic use and much of that is produced by small holders. It's not all going out in exports and fancy furniture whatever. Its, these are important so from every perspective they matter. And we really need to understand what's the problem. Why are they not getting certified? Well there are several reasons I want to focus on a few key ones. One you might guess - it's expensive. Lack the economy of scale, it's very expensive to get certified. So schemes have done things to try to address this. They have created things like root certification where if you team up with your neighbour - it's cheaper and you can all get certified together. And this has helped but it really hasn't made a big enough difference. Its still hasn't really changed the balance.

5:32

So, what, what is the problem I think some of the, another problems that's a little more fundamental maybe and it's about the logic of how these systems work. The certification scheme involves setting usually an international or a national standard; and then hiring third party auditors to come and assess compliance with that standard. Note the word compliance. So some organisation in New York or Brussels or Jakarta is setting the standards about what forests should look like. They're making sure that everyone uniformly complies with the label. And then they get a label out of it. One label. Now, it's all the same label. This is not really good news for a community forests.

6:13

It's not necessarily good news for a big company, that's doing something different or going the extra mile. Cause they all get the same label. So, for example I had a friend call me, or not call me - email me somewhere 21st century actually but, so they emailed me recently and this guy has a family woodlot in Oregon and he was really frustrated because literally this woodlot had been in his family for generations and they were keeping it in a very natural forest state. Very low impact forestry. They're producing high volume, high value wood on slow rotations. And they went through all the expense and the fuss of getting certified - and they're quite proud of it. Then they're driving down the road and they notice right next door there's a poplar plantation - hybrid poplar - and they've got the same label.

7:02

And they're saying well look, you know, we can't compete with them on price, now apparently we're not seen as environmentally any different either. OK. So I'm dumping on standards. I have to make a confession here, and I'm sure you're all aware of this too. Standards are actually really useful too. So like I was in, I came back recently from Brazil and I brought the wrong adaptor plug. And, my plug fit in some of the outlets but not in the ones in my hotel. I was not pleased - I couldn't plug in my computer - I couldn't work on my talk; this was a real problem. And at that moment, I was like, I believe in standardisation - let's go for it. Just, just give me my power - please. But, I can say with a lot of confidence after many many years working in forestry - that adaptor and forests are really pretty different.

7:54

So, there's a lot of different types of forests out there - there's a lot of different people in them, and all of them, probably every single one has a different idea of what's sustainable. So, this is a different problem - so you have a different problem and you don't might not want to always use the same solution. So we need to know are there alternatives to standards? And the good news of course is yes. Good new ideas right? Yes of course. And actually part of that come from technology. Let me give an example; Mobile phones. You may or may not know but now you can go up the far corners of the Amazon, you can go to various places in Siberia; to communities that have very little in terms of material things but they'll have a mobile phone - this is an incredible opportunity.

8:38

So now the local person can tell their story in real time to a global audience. This is a potential. The other things is, potentially if there is demand for this is tracking. So now imagine of you went to your store and you bought your toilet paper or your garden bench or what have you, and you could actually know what forest it came from. No just what country, what forest, and you know, so in that case not only would you know whether it was a plantation or a wood lot - but if you wanted to know more you could go to the source. All of a sudden new worlds of information are available to you.

9:14

So along those lines, I want to talk about a little app we were experiment with to experiment with this idea, and I'm working it with somebody in this audience - Caitlin Schindler - and wherever you are, hi Caitlin. So, we were thinking so yeah what would this look like if you made an app that would do this sort of thing.

9:33

So, here you are you have your app, lets imagine you got a barcode on your product, you scan it, and up comes this really cool co-operative in Guatemala. This is a real co-operative, Caitlin's been there, and there's three community forests that supply to it, and they also happened to be by the way certified, but, the same time they've done a lot of other things I am quite sure. They've probably done all kinds of interesting innovation of their own. And you can find out about all this, what they've learned, what their stories are. You find that they have mahogany that's really high value and companies like another real company to Old Hippies guitar in Oregon is really interested in this kind of thing cause they want to want to develop relationships with their suppliers - they want to know where their wood comes from and then they want to be able to tell their customers where the wood in their guitar comes from. It makes the whole thing more meaningful. So everybody can feel really good about that guitar.

10:23

Now - that's great, it's a nice first step maybe. But we need your help. This isn't enough. You can really help with this in some very easy ways. An others that are more challenging. So easy way - next time or some time when you go to the store, find the store clerk, find the store manager, and when you're looking for products let's say - maybe say is there a certified version available. Cause lets remember right now certification is some signal about how that product was produced. But let's take that another step and say I want to know where this product has come from. And I want to just know it's from Chile either, I don't want to know what country it is, whatever country we live in, we know how diverse our country is. And I want to just know that, and I want to know what farm and what forest.

11:07

And just by asking - they'll probably I'm sorry your, yeah, slightly crazy, whatever - but you know just asking makes a difference because that signals that people want that information. So that's one thing you can do. If one person does that, they're gonna assume a lot of people are interested. Another thing you can do is let us know what you think about the app, or let us know if you'd like to help, cause we're looking for help - or design your own app, you know that's really fine with us. The more the merrier - we just want this to happen.

11:38

Well, why do we want it to happen - because we think the time is really right, right now to be able to connect real people with real trees? Not standardised people with standardised trees only, but let everybody you know have a voice in this process. Let ideas, new ideas and innovation happened at all scales - not just at the standard setting scale.

12:02

We want local people that communicate their visions of what is sustainable. We think it's this kind of idea that we need to meet the new challenges of the 21st century.

12:12

Thank you

12:16

[END]