



Myanmar Teak Trade: Dodgy and Conflict Wood

For Prelims: Myanmar Teak, Junta, CITES, IUCN Red List, African teak, India and Myanmar, International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

For Mains: Issues Associated with illegal timber trade and other wildlife species and conservation of Biodiversity.

Why in News?

Recent investigation by International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) revealed that **India has become the second largest importer of "conflict wood" from Myanmar**, after China. India hasn't banned the import of teak from Myanmar, which is being exported to the US & **EU**.

- These supplies of teak not only chip away at the Myanmar's forest cover but also **provide sustenance to the military regime of Myanmar**.

Why is Teak Imported from Myanmar Described as "Conflict Wood"?

- Following the **military coup in Myanmar** in February 2021, **the military junta** took over Myanma Timber Enterprises (MTE), **with exclusive control over the country's valuable timber and teak trade**. The sales of this "conflict" wood **are a crucial source of income for the military regime**.
- After Western sanctions on timber trade, **India has become a popular stop for illegal timber trade**.
- As per Forest Watch, between February 2021 and April 2022, **Indian companies imported over USD 10 millions of teak**.
 - India is both the **largest importer of teak, and the largest exporter of processed teak wood products in the world**.

What's so Special about Myanmar Teak?

- **About:**
 - Teak wood from Myanmar's deciduous and evergreen forests is **highly valued for its durability, resistance to water and termites**, and is commonly used for high-end furniture, veneers, and ship-decking, especially in the luxury yacht industry. However, the forest cover and teak reserves in Myanmar are shrinking, which ironically increases the wood's value.
 - According to Global Forest Watch, **Myanmar has lost forest cover equivalent to Switzerland's size** over the last twenty years.
- **Status of Myanmar Teak:**
 - Teak (*Tectona grandis*) also known as sagon, sagwan, Indian oak, and teca. Its production covers **1% of global annual timber demand**.
 - Teak, is a large **deciduous tree native to India, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand**. Teak is highly tolerant of a range of climate conditions and can be found from very dry to very

moist regions. It is high resistance to decay and insect damage, and the heartwood changes from olive green to golden brown after exposure.

- This wood species is **listed in the [IUCN Red List of Threatened Species](#) as endangered, but not listed in the [CITES](#).**
 - **African teak** (*Pericopsis elata*), also known as Afrormosia, Kokrodua and Assamela, has brown, green or yellow-brown bark. **The African teak is classified as Endangered on the IUCN Red List 2004, and is listed on Appendix II of CITES.**

What are the Steps taken to Check Illegal Harvesting of Teak from Myanmar?

▪ Steps Taken:

- In 2013, the **EU brought regulations, to prevent illegal timber from entering their markets** (over 70% of the logs exported from Myanmar between 2000-2013 were illegally harvested).
- After the military coup in February 2021, **the EU and US imposed sanctions on all timber trade with Myanmar.**

▪ Impact of these Sanctions:

- Teak from Myanmar continues to flow into the US and some EU countries, while imports into countries like Italy, Croatia, and Greece have increased.
- Traders in Myanmar and India face two challenges: **the conflict on the ground and frequent changes in regulations by Myanmar authorities.**
- After the ban on export of whole logs, a new regulation allowed only teak in "sizes" to be exported.

▪ Loopholes needs to be Plugged:

- Timber traders suggest that buyers could conduct DNA testing to trace the origin of teak from Myanmar, despite sanctions in place. However, **DNA testing is a relatively new concept and not yet commonly used in India.**
- Loopholes have been found in the regulations for exporting teak to EU countries, with **some Indian companies not specifying the origin of the wood or using vague language in transit passes.** These loopholes could be addressed to improve regulation.

What Steps can be Taken to Tackle Illegal Trade for Teak ?

- Use of science to tackle illegal timber trade, like:
 - **Digital Microscopes:** In Brazil, for, the law enforcement staff has been trained to take macroscopic anatomical photographs of timber shipments they stop. Reporting Logging: The logging detection system can track activity in real time and report the data to local authorities or to anyone else in the world.
 - **DNA Profiling:** All trees have a unique genetic fingerprint, allowing us to match sawn wood to its parent tree through DNA profiling.
 - **Isotope analysis:** To identify wood's geographic origin (climate, geology and biology), making them unique to an area.
 - **Near Infrared Spectroscopy:** By exposing wood to near infrared electromagnetic energy, scientists can use spectroscopy to detect its traits and properties.
- **Bridging international and national regulatory gap** by effective and objective collaboration, like **list this species in the CITES.**
- Bring scientific solution to the wood's replacement by other artificial materials.
- Develop genetically modified teak for bridging the demand and supply gap and lower cost in the illegal market.

Source: IE