

Put a cork in it

Winemakers look to sustainable stoppers to save cork oak forests.

By PlentyMag.com

Wed, May 13 2009 at 11:57 AM EST

Read more: [CONSERVATION](#), [WINE](#)



CORK

IT OVER: The manner in which cork is harvested is turning more environmentally-friendly, in addition to an increase in the use of alternatives like plastic corks and screw caps. (Photo:

[tomsaint11/Flickr](#))

Turning to the bottle to fix your troubles is hardly advisable. But uncorking your favorite Pinot Noir may help alleviate one problem—the destruction of the world’s cork oak forests.



The wine industry currently purchases about 70 percent of harvested cork. But increasingly, winemakers are turning to alternatives like plastic plugs and aluminum screw caps because they’re cheaper to produce. If the trend continues, economic incentives for protecting these landscapes could disappear, causing the world’s 2.7 million hectares of cork forest to decrease by as much as two-thirds in the next ten to fifteen years, according to conservation nonprofit World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

Considered biodiversity hotspots, cork oak forests are home to some of the world’s most endangered species, including the Iberian lynx and Barbary deer. The forests also absorb carbon dioxide and play a vital role in preventing soil erosion. Over the last half-century, lax management policies and overexploitation have hurt these ecosystems.

Such practices have reduced cork forests in Morocco from about 300,000 hectares two centuries ago to 60,000 hectares today. A massive switch to synthetic stoppers, which cost about half as much a cork, would further stress the forests. “[It] would result in exacerbating existing threats such as overgrazing, fires, conversion to other uses and land abandonment,” says WWF spokesperson Chantal Menard. The decline would also affect the 100,000 people who rely on cork forests for their jobs and livelihoods.

Environmental groups are looking for solutions. One new project encourages consumers to seek out certified-sustainable cork products — the same way people select products with

organic labels. Since 2005, nonprofits like the WWF and Rainforest Alliance have been certifying cork forests in Portugal and Spain with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), a nonprofit that ensures wood is harvested in an eco-friendly manner. And the three groups hope to expand to the other five cork-producing countries — Algeria, Morocco, Italy, Tunisia and France. Last summer, Oregon's Willamette Valley Vineyards became the first winery in the world to seal its bottles with FSC-approved corks. Others in the US and Europe are interested in following suit, says WWF forestry coordinator Mateo Carino Fraisse.

Cork harvesting requires scraping off the outer layer of bark which then regenerates naturally, but the bark should only be harvested once every nine to twelve years. "FSC certification ensures forests are being managed in a way that is environmentally, socially, and economically responsible," says Gretchen Ruethling, a spokesperson for Rainforest Alliance.

Ultimately, cork forests' survival really depends on consumers. "The use of natural cork stoppers will only be maintained if consumers show companies they value using cork over synthetics," says Ruethling. That's a notion worth raising a glass to.

Story by Sarah Parsons. This article originally appeared in Plenty in October 2008.

Copyright Environ Press 2008

<http://www.mnn.com/food/wine/stories/put-a-cork-in-it>