



THE GIVING TREES

- ▶ How IKEA uses its sheer size to influence global forest policy for the good.
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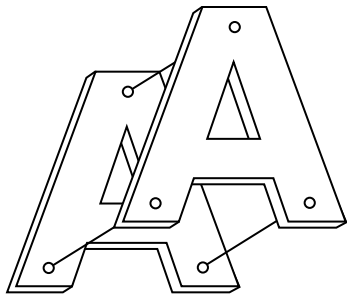
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A single tree that falls in a forest can open up a patch of light big enough for one hundred seedlings to sprout. From there, it's a competition. Each tiny tree tries to grow faster and leafier than its neighbors, sucking up that beam of sunlight so it can grow tall and straight and throw other trees into shadow.

It will take about 110 years for the strongest seedlings to mature to harvestable size. Over that span, wars will be fought, dictators will rise and fall, and the way humans use the land will change.

Such is the case in Romania. Through a surprising mix of circumstances, the Balkan country—touching Ukraine and Hungary to the north and Serbia and Bulgaria to the south—is home to some of the last stands of old growth forests in all of Europe. It's a wilderness that needs protection in a world hungry for resources.

One of the hungriest companies is IKEA. The global home goods and furniture powerhouse, sucks up more than one percent of all the wood harvested on Earth each year, turning it into inexpensive book shelves, chairs, couches, countertops, and much more in 355 massive stores in 29 countries.

"We love wood," says Mikhail Tarasov, IKEA Global Forestry Manager, who works with a team of 20 forestry specialists across the globe to lead the corporation's "forest positive" agenda. "As people are moving more and more into cities, losing their connection with nature, we believe wood helps them reconnect."

It's a romantic idea from a company that consumes a whole lot of natural resources, but that voracious appetite for lumber drives the company to work to ensure wood is harvested sustainably while enabling it to influence forest policy on a global level.



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1. Small logs are destined for particleboard, leaving more room for healthy trees. 2. WWF's Per Larsson is continually pushing IKEA to do more. 3. Mikhail Tarasov says all the wood IKEA uses from Romania is FSC certified. 4. Smoke hangs thick in the valleys of Transylvania.

Tarasov says unsustainable forest management might be cheaper at first, but the costs pile up quickly over the long haul. That's because the constant search for controversial wood leaves behind degraded forests and creates bad relations with communities. "[Relying] on unsustainable extraction of wood with no calculations of allowable harvest volumes, all of a sudden [a company] may face a serious issue with availability of wood."

With long-term availability of raw materials top of mind, IKEA has worked since 2002 in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund, a global conservation organization, to identify and protect old growth forests while pushing countries toward more sustainable practices in logging. They may seem like strange bedfellows. After all, at

just one single factory in Romania, 1.4 million Terj wooden folding chairs are pumped out for IKEA every year, while WWF is all about protecting nature. But Per Larsson, a senior advisor on WWF's Global Forest Leadership Team, says the only way to move the needle is by working with corporate giants. "We are losing the equivalent of 40 football fields of forest every single minute," Larsson says. "Our brand is very valuable, but we have to take chances if we want to achieve bigger change. We cannot achieve impact at the scale or rate that is needed on our own."

The IKEA-WWF partnership has contributed to responsible logging practices in 15 different countries, as well as protection of virgin forests. In 2017, the pair helped bring more than 30,000 hectares of ancient beech



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"RETAINING VIRGIN FORESTS, FOR ME AND FOR MANY, IS KEY TO MAINTAINING OUR IDENTITY. "

—RADU VLAD



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forests in the Carpathian Mountains, which span Romania and Ukraine, protection by UNESCO. "Retaining virgin forests, for me and for many, is key for maintaining our identity," says Radu Vlad, a native of Romania and forest and regional project coordinator for the WWF's Danube-Carpathian program. "Forests are an exceptional universal heritage, a pure natural evolution over thousands of years in this part of the world. They are real living laboratories that will help us understand not only the mysteries of the forest universe but equally, where do we come from, who we are, where are we going for and how to live in harmony with nature."

Vlad is on the front lines with WWF, working with counterparts at IKEA to help local stakeholders, from foresters to factories, understand the importance of sustainability. It isn't easy—environmental concerns are not top of mind in Romania. For the average citizen, eco-consciousness stops with using old plastic Coke bottles to store and sell the local hooch, a super-strong plum brandy known as palinka. The air is thick with smoke in the fall, as homeowners burn leaves and cornfields and fire up their stoves. A third of the population still heats their homes with wood, and many



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cook with it as well, so you won't travel far in Transylvania before encountering a horse cart plodding through traffic, piled high with logs.

In fact, the reason Romania is well forested has less to do with preservation than circumstance. During the punishing communist regime of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, vast swaths of forest were reserved exclusively for his hunting pleasure. With post-communist redistribution of land, rebuilding the economy and infrastructure over the 30 years since Ceausescu's fall, progress has been steady but slow.

"Three-and-a-half million house-

5. A feast of wild boar nourishes foresters while protecting forests from the invasive creatures. 6. Ultra-thin veneer enables IKEA suppliers at the Aviva factory to build many tables from a single log. 7. All 1.4 million Terj folding chairs sold worldwide are assembled by hand in Romania. 8. Assembling appealing butcher-block style veneer is painstaking work. 9. Freshly painted chairs are inspected carefully before shipping. 10. Many forestry operations in Romania still use horses for the harvest—the land is too steep for mechanical equipment.

holds need their firewood," says Otto Zvagins, IKEA's Regional Forestry Manager South East Europe, who hails from Latvia, and has traveled around Europe for IKEA for nearly 15 years, working closely with local suppliers to ensure the company's sustainability standards are met.

Stakeholders got a hard push when IKEA announced in 2015 that all the

wood they consume will be from "More Sustainable Sources"—either recycled or from Forest Stewardship Council certified forests—by 2020. In areas like Romania, at high risk for poor forestry management, the deadline is 2017. "We decided to be really bold," says IKEA's Tarasov, noting that just eight years ago, IKEA was only getting 16 percent of their wood from FSC forests.

Now that number stands at 85 percent globally, and includes all of the wood sourced from high-risk countries.

FSC standards are negotiated by each country, and take into account everything from what types of trees can be planted to how they are removed from the forest. Traditional operations often use streambeds to drag out the wood, because it's easier, but it also results in pollution, erosion, and damage to fragile ecosystems. Even fallen trees and branches can be regulated, as they provide important nutrition to the forest. "A fallen tree lives on for many years," says IKEA's Zvagins, provid-

ing food for the earth as well as a host of living things, from mushrooms to beetles.

Accepting only FSC-certified wood in Romania has provided economic incentives to comply with requirements of the law, says Zvagins, but that didn't make it easy. In autumn of 2015, their share of FSC-certified wood in Romania—an important country for beech and oak—was around 37 percent. "The goal looked not just challenging but super-challenging," he recalls. "It took a lot of effort for everyone—our suppliers, business teams, and us foresters trying to steer the process."

This aggressive stand was a smart move according to Larsson from WWF. "To choose the highest risk first makes the most impact," he says. "Many companies would choose the easiest places first."

That being said, the global giant still has a long way to go. Larsson notes that IKEA still uses vast amounts of other products that contribute to deforestation, such as the soy and palm oil in their food items.

"We are all the time challenging IKEA to do better," Larsson says. "The story doesn't end here. This is only the beginning."