



Carving out a better future

Scour the galleries and craft shops of virtually any city in Europe or North America, and you'll find woodcarvings from as far afield as Bali and Bolivia, Mexico and Madagascar. Some will cost you just a few dollars; others might set you back the equivalent of a month's wages, and occasionally more. Some will come from places where woodcarving has enriched local livelihoods and made good use of forest resources. Others will come from areas where woodcarving is an occupation of last resort for the poor, and where the demand for raw material – wood – has caused significant damage to forests.

'Woodcarving provides us with many examples of non-timber forest projects that have good scope for improving livelihoods, but where various factors often prevent this from happening,' explains CIFOR scientist Brian Belcher, co-editor with Anthony Cunningham and Bruce Campbell of *Carving out a Future: Forests, Livelihoods and the International Woodcarving Trade*. 'What we wanted to do in the book was look at a whole range of different products and establish what factors influenced their impact on livelihoods and the environment.'

Many of the book's authors were also involved in CIFOR's Non-timber Forest Product Case Comparison Project, and the stories told here present an insight into the remarkable richness of the woodcarving trade. Certain common elements link the various traditions. For example, virtually all woodcarvers are men, and the basic carving tools – saw, axe, chisel and knife – are the same wherever you go. Historically, the greatest diversity of items comes from settled farming communities, rather than from pastoralists or hunter-gatherers, and woodcarvers have tended to make use of relatively few species of plants. Tourism and globalisation have meant that the trade has become increasingly commercialised over recent years.

The contrast between successful woodcarving industries and those which provide relatively few benefits to local livelihoods is stark. 'If you look at somewhere like Bali, and contrast it with Zimbabwe,' explains Belcher, 'you get a good idea about which factors make for a successful woodcarving industry.' In Bali, a combination of factors – highly skilled and well-organised woodcarvers, enlightened entrepreneurs who have been willing to seek out export markets, and supportive government policies – has created an industry which is not only highly profitable, but environmentally sustainable. There are now 24,000 woodcarvers in Bali, most making a good living from their trade. In Zimbabwe, in contrast, large numbers of woodcarvers produce large quantities of relatively low-quality, low-value carvings from an open-access resource. The result is over-exploitation of some of the country's forests and widespread poverty among producers.

'It's essential that woodcarvers don't flood the market with the same product, and that they make the best use of sustainably harvested wood by going for quality, rather than quantity,' explains Anthony Cunningham, director of the People and Plants Initiative.

He illustrates his case with the example of *Spirostachys venenifera*, commonly known as African sandalwood, which is used by woodcarvers in Kenya. At present, *Spirostachys*, a tree restricted to certain clay soils, is frequently used to make cheap items such as salad bowls. 'It's an exceptionally high-value wood, and it's also used to make very beautiful sculptures,' explains Cunningham. 'Using it to make salad bowls is a waste of a valuable resource.' There are many other woods that could make just as good salad bowls, and Cunningham believes it would make sense if *Spirostachys* was simply used for high-value carving.

The authors of *Carving out a Future* stress that woodcarving industries will only thrive if they make sustainable use of resources. In some situations, this will imply switching from one sort of wood to another. For

example, in a pilot project in Kenya, woodcarvers are being encouraged to use neem, a tree in plentiful supply which can be used for a variety of purposes. And in Bali, the Ministry of Forestry provided local people with seedlings to plant on marginal land. Again, the species chosen, *Paraserianthes falcataria*, was not only suitable for woodcarving, but provided fodder for livestock and fuel for humans.

The book suggests that importers can play a role in improving the sustainability of the woodcarving trade. A good example of what can be done is provided by the US-based Mennonite Central Committee, which for the past 20 years has been running the Ten Thousand Villages job-creation programme in Kenya. The programme purchases handicrafts at a fair price for producers, and these are sold in some 200 stores in North America. Recently, the programme has begun purchasing sustainably produced 'good wood' products, and it has been funding carving co-operatives to establish tree nurseries and reforestation programmes.

Carving out a Future also provides guidance for policy-makers. 'All too often, the typical response of government is to look at the rows of woodcarvers and sellers sitting beside the road, decide that conditions are deplorable and pay for a new building where they can sell their goods,' says Belcher. 'But this doesn't solve anything.' It makes much more sense, he suggests, for policy-makers to encourage woodcarvers to organise themselves into associations so that they end up working with each other, rather than against. 'The associations which thrive will be the ones that can distinguish their product from the rest of the market, and guarantee high quality and fair returns for producers,' says Belcher. 'Just like Sunkist did for the orange growers in California.'

The book has a clear message for consumers. It suggests that tourists visiting developing countries with woodcarving industries, and those buying imported goods at home, should be prepared to pay a good price for good-quality carvings. By doing so, they will be encouraging industries which support local livelihoods and sustain healthy forests.



Avondale market in Harare, Zimbabwe. The woodcarving trade is worth hundreds of millions of dollars. The trade provides jobs and an income for significant numbers of people, but in some areas – Zimbabwe being one – it has led to the over-exploitation of certain tree species. (Photo by Peter Frost)