Recommendations to ensure the long term survival of cork oak landscapes

WWF is calling the wine and the cork industries to reverse the current and potential threats that affect the survival of cork oak landscapes.
In order to maintain the existence of the cork forests, the wine and cork industries need to take action now to maintain markets for cork stoppers.

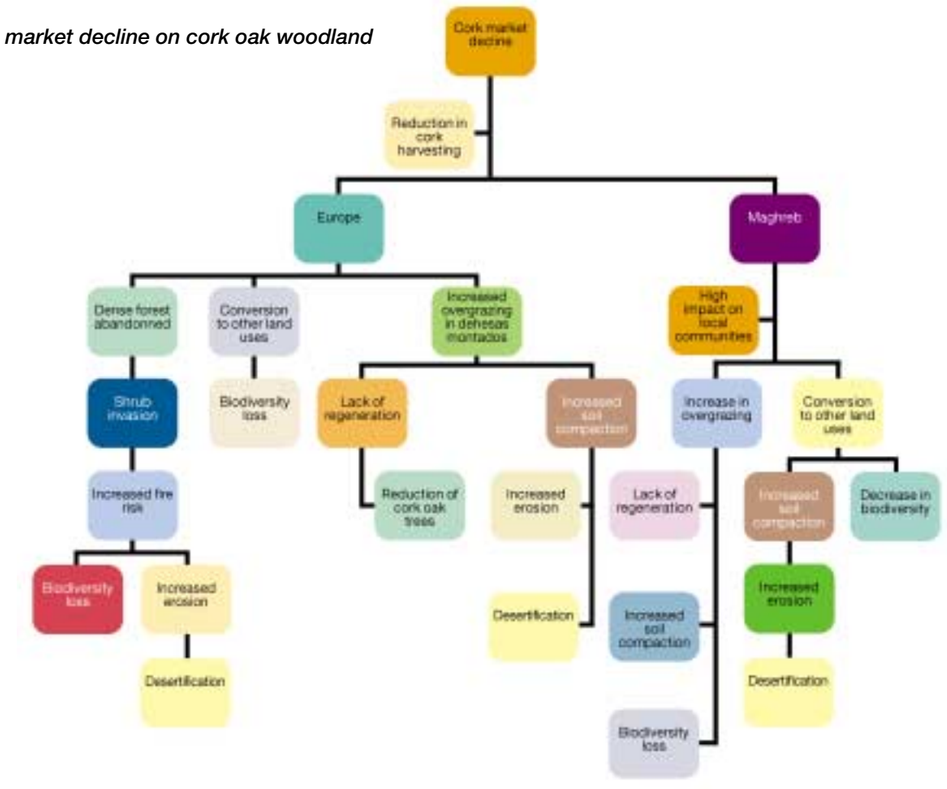
- The wine industry needs to demonstrate its corporate responsibility by considering the environmental and socioeconomic values of cork – by choosing cork and promoting its use among customers.
- The cork industry needs to maintain and improve the quality of cork stoppers (addressing in particular the issues related to TCA and traceability) and communicating progress to the wine industry and consumers.
- This all needs to be combined with improving management, protection and restoration practices in cork oak landscapes and promoting their credible certification. The cork and wine industries can help to secure this by engaging in and supporting FSC certification.

WWF aims to work with the cork and the wine industries to promote products from sustainably-managed cork oak landscapes, and to encourage responsible purchasing attitudes through the market chain, from cork and wine industries to end consumers.

By addressing the environmental and social corporate responsibilities which are more and more requested by consumers, WWF believes that industries offer added value to their consumers while working for nature. WWF also aims to continue to challenge the cork industry to produce a high quality product which will help guarantee the market share of cork stoppers.

It is clear that the future survival of cork oak forests rests largely on the market for cork oak stoppers and that the wine industry has a major role to play in meeting this challenge. If nothing is done, a rich biodiversity could be lost forever and the economy of the Western Mediterranean could be seriously damaged.

Effects of cork market decline on cork oak woodland



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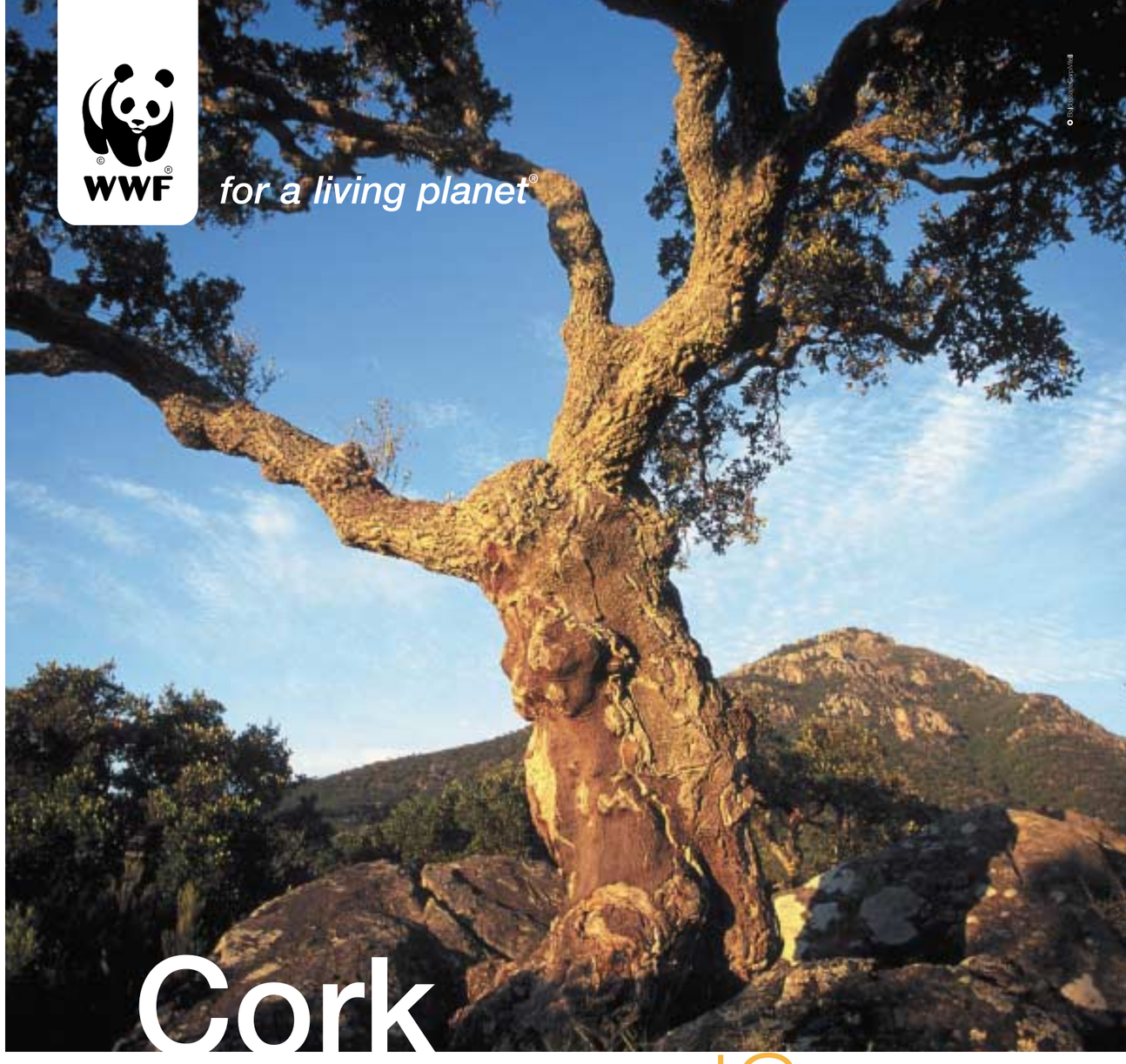

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Cork oak tree (*Quercus suber*), Andalucia, Spain © WWF-Canon / E. Parker – White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*), nest building, Morocco © WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey – Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*), Spain © WWF-Spain / L. Suarez – Cork harvesting, Tunisia © WWF-Canon / S. Rich

Cork screwed?

Environmental and economic impacts of the cork stoppers market.

CHOOSE CORK

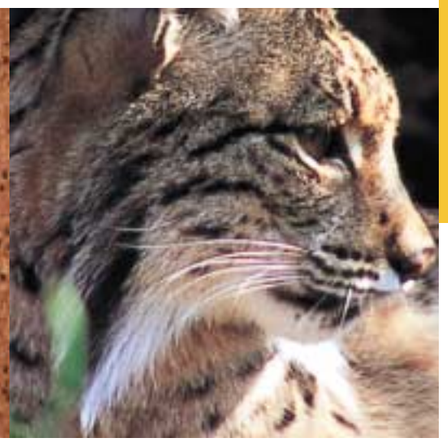
Cork oak landscapes cover approximately 2.7 million hectares of Portugal, Spain, Algeria, Morocco, Italy, Tunisia and France. As well as providing a vital source of income for more than 100,000 people, these landscapes also support one of the highest levels of biodiversity among forest habitats, including globally endangered species such as the Iberian Lynx, the Iberian Imperial eagle and the Barbary deer.

Cork is a truly sustainable product – it is renewable and biodegradable. Cork harvesting is an environmentally friendly process during which not a single tree is cut down. The bark renews itself ready for the next harvesting.

Over 15 billion cork stoppers are produced every year and sold worldwide to the wine industry. These stoppers are processed from bark harvested from cork oak woodlands that have existed in the Western Mediterranean for thousands of years.

The use of cork for bottle stoppers comprises almost 70% of the total value of the cork market. The wine industry thus plays a vital role in maintaining the economic value of cork and the cork oak forests.





The increase in the market share of alternative wine stoppers, specifically plastic stoppers and screwtops, could reduce the economic value of cork lands therefore leading to conversion to other uses, abandonment, degradation, and finally loss of one of the best and most valuable examples of a human–nature balanced system. As the forests have an economic value to local communities, people care for the forests. This helps maintain their environmental values as well as reducing the risk of fires and desertification.

Unless the commercial value of cork stoppers is maintained, and especially demand for cork stoppers, there is a risk that the Western Mediterranean cork oak landscapes will face an economic crisis, an increase in poverty, an intensification in forest fires, a loss of irreplaceable biodiversity and an accelerated desertification process within less than 10 years, according to the worst case scenarios.

Key findings

WWF's report on the benefits of cork and the threats to the cork oak landscapes analyses the trends in the wine stopper market and their potential impacts.

The key findings are:

- The increasing use of alternative wine stoppers may reduce the market value of cork, and thus the incentive to preserve and manage cork oak landscapes.
- The recent increases in global wine production and markets for cheaper wines which are consumed soon after bottling, have encouraged the accelerated use of synthetic stoppers and screwtops. This is particularly true of the Australian wine market, and is also found in other expanding New World wine markets such as New Zealand and South Africa.
- By 2015, 95% of wine produced could be closed with synthetic stoppers, with only the remaining 5% of best quality wines closed with cork. This is on the basis of current trends continuing and under the worst case scenario.
- If the synthetic market share increases to 95%, cork production will decrease to 19,500 t by 2015, compared to 300,000 t currently. Such a reduction in cork harvesting would place three quarters of the cork oak surface area at risk from conversion, abandonment and fires, by 2015.
- This projected scenario would result in a dramatic decrease in the direct employment related to the cork sector, affecting the cork industry, including cork harvesters. In this case, by 2015, 27,500 industrial jobs and 35,000 forestry jobs would disappear.
- If these threats are not addressed, by 2015, the Western Mediterranean could lose up to 2 million ha of cork oak forests, as well as key threatened species such as the Barbary deer, due to fire, conversion, degradation and desertification.

The economic importance of cork

Cork has a wide variety of uses, from clothes to insulation and even rocket technology, and important international and national markets. The cork markets represent an annual export trade value of around US $ 329 million.

- Despite the variety of cork products, however, bottle stoppers drive the cork industry, as they represent almost 70 % of the total cork market value.
- Cork oak woodlands provide employment and guarantee the survival of local communities and their cultural heritage. More than 100,000 people in the seven Mediterranean cork-producing countries depend directly and indirectly on the cork economies.
- In North Africa, the cork economy may represent an opportunity for poverty reduction and socio-economic development.
- The natural values of cork appeal to current green and ethical consumer trends, such as the dramatic increase in the sales of fair-trade products in the UK. The Fair Trade brand announced last year that UK Fair Trade sales topped £140m for 2004 – a 51% rise since 2003.

The environmental values of cork

Cork oak landscapes support a wealth of biodiversity, including globally endangered species.

- Cork oak landscapes are mosaics of habitats comprising diverse mixed forest types and rich pastures, shaped by people for thousands of years. They sustain one of the highest levels of plant biodiversity among forest habitats and a rich fauna including some of the most threatened species in the Mediterranean. They also play an important role for migratory birds.
- Cork oak landscapes are particularly well adapted to the harsh Mediterranean climate and soil conditions and play a vital role in the prevention of soil erosion and desertification.
- No trees are cut down when cork is harvested. Cork is obtained by harvesting the outer layer of bark from cork oak. This professional harvesting technique does not harm the tree.
- Man has shaped cork oak forests into sustainable systems and they are an ecologically optimal asset superior to any other agro-forestry system.
- Cork stoppers are biodegradable and can be recycled into other products. They have low environmental impact compared to aluminium and plastic stoppers.