



A future for ebony in Cameroon



Planting ebony

Ebony wood has been traded since ancient times. Its dense, high-value black wood is used, for example, in sculpture and details on musical instruments.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature lists the ebony found in Cameroon, *Diospyros crassiflora*, as endangered, mainly because of a lack of large trees. It is estimated that there are 190 000 ebony trees across Western Africa with a diameter at breast height

greater than 60 cm (the minimum harvest diameter), compared to an estimated 30 million trees with a dbh of 10–59 cm. Small-diameter ebony does not contain a large proportion of the highly desired black heartwood.

The people of Cameroon stand to benefit if more ebony trees with black heartwood could be grown and if more wood processing took place inside the country.

The Crelicam ebony mill

The Crelicam company and its one mill working on ebony in Yaoundé is co-owned by guitar manufacturer Taylor Guitars and Spanish tonewood supplier Madinter, which specializes in providing wood for musical instruments worldwide.

Crelicam emphasizes as much in-country processing as possible and exports parts for musical instruments. Crelicam aims at creating a new standard in an industry that has too often prioritized low prices over compliance with local laws, protection of the environment, and the quality of life of its employees. The company is committed to a policy of zero tolerance of corruption.

Crelicam is the largest exporter of ebony from Cameroon, with a quota of 1 200 tonnes in 2016.

Geographical positioning of each felled tree

The precise location of each tree harvested for Crelicam is recorded using a geographic positioning system, and an identifying number is assigned so that each piece of wood can be tracked from stump to market. The widespread use of this clear, verifiable chain of custody could help reduce illegal harvesting. Knowing the origin of the wood also opens up the possibility of returning to collect propagation materials from the best parent trees.

Collaboration with Congo Basin Institute

The University of California (UCLA), the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) and other institutions have established the Congo Basin Institute (CBI) in Yaoundé to help address sub-Saharan Africa's environmental and development challenges.

Taylor Guitars' co-founder Bob Taylor and his wife Cindy privately sponsored the Ebony Project at CBI, which seeks to create a programme for the sustainable production and stewardship of ebony. The project is studying West African ebony distribution and basic ecology while also pioneering propagation approaches, including from seed, vegetative propagation from shoots and leaves, and tissue culture. The project's initial three-year goal is to plant 15 000 ebony trees on community forest lands.

Crelicam and CBI have already started to supply ebony plants to farmers in a small number of villages to plant in community forests and will pay them for the first five years of management. Participating villages also receive fruit tree starts at no cost.



Ebony seedlings in the Crelicam nursery

Improved production and social impact

Crelicam has fully refurnished its Yaoundé plant, thereby modernizing production and improving working conditions – including by providing new lunch facilities and a water pump that is also available to local people outside the plant.

Jet black ebony has long been the accepted standard in the music industry. Only a fraction of the ebony found in nature is completely black, however, and there is no definitive way of knowing wood colour before tree-felling. As a result, many trees are cut down and then abandoned in the forest. Because there is no acoustic difference between black and coloured ebony, Crelicam has broken with this tradition and leaves no felled trees in the forest. Today, many of Taylor Guitars' most expensive models prominently feature coloured ebony. The company encourages other instrument makers to follow its example.



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Ebony stump marked with ID number and coordinates



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Communal water outside Crelicam mill



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Tissue culture of ebony

Challenges

Many challenges remain, such as the following:

- **Knowledge.** Many years of focused research will be required to accumulate sufficient knowledge to ensure the sustainable management of ebony in natural forests and to grow the species efficiently in community-managed plantations.
- **Protection versus development.** Because ebony is listed as endangered, limitations on its international trade could hinder market-driven conservation and management. With more research, such as through the CBI, policies can be developed to ensure an appropriate balance between protection and production.
- **Natural habitat destruction.** Cameroon's population is growing rapidly, and forests are being cleared to make way for agriculture. Increasing the value of tree species in managed natural forests will help make forests an economically competitive land use.
- **Long-term support for farmers.** Farmers who plant ebony receive financial support for the first five years of management. Methods – and funding – are needed to support growers over a longer period, possibly in the form of credit.

For further information, please contact:

Forest Products and Statistics Team

Forestry Policy and Resources Division (FOA)
Forestry Department
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FPS@fao.org