Bob Taylor (left) grades ebony at the Crelicam factory

THE GREEN SHOOTS OF RECOVERY

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Bob Taylor of Taylor Guitars is positioning his company as one that places responsible timber usage at the heart of its decision making. This is reflected in projects in Cameroon, Hawaii and closer to home. Taylor talks to us about why he feels so passionately about his work, how corporate and consumer expectations have to shift and how it's possible to promote sustainability and still be profitable

Ebony trees growing in Cameroon

Bob Taylor is in the vanguard of ecologically and ethically minded guitar manufacturers. He has positioned his company, Taylor Guitars, to be held to a higher standard when it comes to the ethical sourcing and replenishing of existing tonewood stocks and been instrumental in establishing flagship programmes in Cameroon and, more recently, Hawaii. The sustainability of certain woods became a hot topic of conversation among luthiers after the recent changes to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which saw all woods of the dalbergia genus added to the second appendix, meaning they would come under stricter control and require documentation when crossing international borders.

Taylor's work has not been a knee-jerk response to recent changes, but a concerted, long-term effort to preserve existing wood stocks, explore alternative, sustainable timber options and act as a steward in the guitar industry. It was a responsibility that Taylor felt develop over the years. "I grew into it a little at a time," Taylor says. "When I was a teenager making guitars in the 70s it wasn't on my mind. Each passing year, though, brought on more knowledge, maturity and success. It's the right thing to do, and now we can do larger projects

Crelicam ownership partners Bob Taylor (far right), Vidal de Teresa (second from right) and members of the Crelicam team with ebony saplings

Aerial photo of koa plantings (about 4000 trees)

that garner attention. It's nothing new; it's just larger and more in-depth."

Those larger projects – including Taylor's work with Pacific Tonewoods, its ebony project in Cameroon at the Crelicam factory and its most recent koa project in Hawaii with Paniolo Tonewoods – came about because Taylor is a leading player in the global guitar market. A privileged position, and one not afforded to many. Bob Taylor is aware that while his company is able to play a leading role, there is plenty that smaller guitar manufacturers can do to promote sustainability.

"Each guitar maker has the ability to do something," he says. "If a guitar builder is large like Taylor, they should do ethical sourcing of wood and replenishing. A small luthier cannot replenish, but they can ethically source wood. One part of ethical sourcing is to care about the quality of life and the pay of the people closest to the wood. We must each know that our wood is coming from places where laws are followed and people are paid."

That leads us to Cameroon's Crelicam factory, an ebony mill with a focus on the sustainable sourcing of wood, socially responsible forestry and the improvement of the lives of its workers. Taylor, along with Madinter, its partner in the separate company TLM who runs Crelicam, ensures that the harvesting of wood is done in line with national and international legislation. Perhaps the biggest change for acoustic guitar lovers is the use of variegated ebony by Taylor – ebony that isn't pure black. This so-called b-stock would have formerly been wasted. As the grading system is only applicable once the trees have been felled, Taylor estimated that as many as nine in 10 trees were discarded to find one tree with jet black ebony.

To make this work, Taylor has had to battle consumer taste – a notoriously fickle beast – and an unfamiliar governmental system, but he finds immense pride in the work done by TLM. "The advancement of the factory conditions and our 65 employees' success is by far my proudest achievement. If I talk about it I'll usually choke up. It touches me deeply... and doing good work there has deep meaning to me."

But the difficulties faced in Cameroon are immense, and the factory relies on large investment to stay operational: "I face challenges that are overwhelming," Taylor admits. "The market still has many alternatives to our ebony. Remember, we sell ebony, and Taylor is just one customer. Our costs are high – twice the normal method – but our price has to be the same or we sell nothing. If we can reach profitability, the positives will outweigh the negatives because the business will then be self-sufficient."

Though Taylor reveals to us that Paniolo Tonewoods – the koa operation running in Hawaii (more on that later) – is profitable, he believes that consumer attitudes towards woods and the cost of guitars need to continue to change before other long-term projects can start to turn a profit.

"I think players' expectations towards ebony have shifted. In fact they love any ebony with colour. I'm proud of them for that. The next hurdle I have is the difference in the cost for us to product a legal, ethical, moral fingerboard versus one produced in the old fashion, where the people who work on the ebony in the forest and factory in Cameroon can enjoy some of the financial benefits we have. Why should they live in such poverty while we enjoy our guitars?"

Taylor adds: "Guitar players still think that guitars are too expensive. One thing that always shocks me when reading a guitar review is seeing the ratings and how the price is always challenged as being too expensive. But I know that once a person sees how a guitar is made they change their opinion into thinking there's more value. If they saw how wood was produced they wouldn't believe how much work it is. These days people want quality things but want them cheap. Sustainability and moral production of natural materials raises the price. In this way, I think customers are out of touch with what it takes for people to be paid for their work. I cannot tell the story by myself, but we are all a bit too selfish and think our

Milling ebony at the Crelicam factory

dollar is more important than the other person's dollar. I may sound harsh, but I'm now old enough to say what I observe."

The political situation in the US is making headlines around the world, and President Trump has, in his nascent presidency, through his rhetoric and cabinet choices, signalled that his administration will be less environmentally minded than his predecessor. However, Taylor is optimistic that this will have little effect on the work he is spearheading.

"I'm sure there will be some bad examples," he says, "but overall industry is made up of people, and people want positive environmental change. If the laws and regulations all fell today, it wouldn't change any of our actions toward sustainability and good treatment of the environment. All you have to do is go look at a forest and you see what needs to be done. For those who will, they don't need a law, and for those who won't, citizens will stop them. Remember, we're 'becoming' sustainable, and a new president can't make or break that. I see a bright future, because new people are being born to inherit the earth, and they'll do a better job than us. And their next generation will improve too. I think we've reached our low

A koa forest in Hawaii

Master grade koa upgrade on a Taylor K28e

point. There are too many people who know we've reached a low point for it to be swept under the rug. Things are improving and will continue to improve, in my opinion."

Taylor points to the work being done by Paniolo Tonewoods, a joint venture between Pacific Rim Tonewoods and Taylor Guitars, as an example of that improvement, and to show how others may follow suit if they can see that sustainable practices can make business sense. The aim is to bring koa and other tonewoods to market via 'good forest management, reforestation and innovation', working in partnership with local Hawaiian groups to find new ways to plant, grow and manage koa forests. Taylor explains how this came about:

"Koa, like all woods, has become hard to source, and even with a lot of effort it seems impossible to buy now. But a closer look reveals many opportunities to go into a forest and reforest it, helping it to regrow to its natural condition. We've found ways to pay for this with the dead and dying koa within those forests. Challenges have included being unknown on the island (which is changing fast and positively) and finding places and relationships where we can work.

"Good work always inspires others," Taylor says. "Because of some incredibly successful projects that Paniolo has done in Hawaii, ranchers and land owners there now believe that they could convert or restore much of their grassland back into koa/ohia forests. Why? Because it could be profitable. If people think that growing trees is or should be charitable work, then they don't understand sustainability at all. Are tomatoes sustainable? Of course they are, because it's profitable to grow them. We just have to make trees profitable to grow. This will happen in many different forms, because in many industries like construction lumber or plantation teak, it is already profitable. Small operations such as our Paniolo in Hawaii, or Crelicam in Cameroon, attract attention. This magazine is interested, as are the readers, and so are some industrialists or landowners. We can show that it can be profitable if you're in the right situation to do so. In the case of ebony, we have to start it with investment from us, which looks like charity really, but others will be able to profit from it someday, and the sustainable cycle can start. Without selling something there is no sustainability.

"We, guitar makers, and we, the world, are becoming sustainable, and we'll always be 'becoming' sustainable. We can't reach it entirely unless we quit growing as a population at least. But I do think it's possible to farm guitar wood, if I can be so basic in my description. It can be done, and we can make great progress in 30 and 50 years. Do not think that this is a one- or 10-year project. This means we have to be super-proactive in the next 10 or 20 years."

Taylor has strong opinions on how he thinks the next few years will play out for luthiers, with the protection afforded to certain species by CITES likely to be extended. At the start of 2017, all rosewoods were added to appendix two of CITES, which contains 'species that are not necessarily now threatened with extinction but that may become so unless trade is closely controlled.' Practically, this means that the movement of rosewood across borders will require an export permit (or proof that the wood was legally procured before January 2017). Permits will be granted 'if the relevant authorities are satisfied that certain conditions are met, above all that trade will not be detrimental to the survival of the species in the wild.'

This move has already had an effect on Taylor's guitars: "All the rosewoods we use will be used in lesser quantities and on more expensive guitars. Why? Because there is expense associated with using the wood and exporting and importing both the wood and the guitar. That expense for permits is the same for an expensive or a cheap guitar. Consequently, we'll see fewer low-priced rosewood guitars in the market. We also will not use any rosewood as a decorative feature on a guitar that doesn't already have sides and back of rosewood. For instance, we don't use rosewood headplate veneers now because that would cause any guitar to become covered under CITES.

K28e guitars on koa planks

Award for Corporate Excellence (ACE) presented to Taylor Guitars for work in Cameroon, 2013

Ironically, this wastes rosewood rather than saving it because these small parts are made and used from the smaller pieces of the log after the premium pieces like the sides and backs are cut. This means that this wood goes to waste now. It's an unintended negative consequence of the control.

"I think even the woods that we plant in some cases will fall under protection. We seek to find a workable forest and a way forward that allows work while this is being done. But we cannot do it by ourselves; relatively speaking, we're just a small company. Right now if a species comes under CITES protection, it doesn't matter if I've planted it; it still has to follow the regulations. In time, as more planting occurs, I can imagine that rules will be adjusted, but there are no guarantees for that."

Should manufacturers be looking to use woods like ebony and koa that have an established reputation as tonewoods or should they be looking towards existing sustainable alternatives?

"Both. Ironically, Indian rosewood is a sustainable alternative. There they manage it well, but now it's controlled more with the latest update to CITES. I don't think it's too late with ebony yet, in that we can reduce the trees we use while planting at a high rate. In my opinion it's all important, and no species now can be sustainable without a proper planting programme. When one thinks of sustainable alternatives, usually one thinks of a wood we haven't discovered yet, but that doesn't exist. We have to roll up our sleeves, spend some of our energy and money, and repair hundreds of years of damage to grow trees."

Taylor is also acutely aware that as a guitar maker, the responsibility is on him to provide the right product for the market, but, further, that expectations from the consumer need to change in order to ensure guitars and guitar making (something he believed was once "the most innocent job a person could imagine") remain an affordable and viable prospect in the coming decades: "It is the guitar maker's responsibility to make a compelling guitar both in terms of sound and beauty. So even if we change woods, it's still the guitar maker's job to make a good guitar with that. But the player cannot ask for materials that don't exist or that cause people harm, so I hope they respond to our offerings. In the same way that time heals wounds, it also heals the shock of change. But change is always a shock. I often say that most guitar buyers are environmentalists, except on the day they spend their hard-earned money on their dream guitar. But I forgive them and understand. If we work together, we will find a new excitement. We are working hard to make beautiful guitars that please all the senses." ■

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