Can’t see the cork for the trees? How a lack of materials knowledge could be undermining the desire to shop sustainably

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A survey has revealed that many people in the UK are unsure about the sources of natural materials such as cork, bamboo and rubber. Only around half can accurately identify which of these is sourced from trees. Even more pronounced is a lack of knowledge about textiles and the source of the materials used to make them. Over twice as many people thought that cotton (sourced from plants grown agriculturally) is sourced from forests, as viscose (made from cellulose, mostly sourced from trees). Although 8% knew that viscose could be sourced from trees, the same number thought this was also true for polyester (made from petroleum).

73% of people believe it important for man-made cellulosic fibres, such as viscose, to be sustainably sourced, but a lack of knowledge could be undermining their good intentions. And although younger generations tend to top the charts in terms of sustainability awareness and action, they trail behind their more senior counterparts when it comes to identifying that cork and natural rubber come from trees. 76% of millennials want reassurance that the forest products they buy have been sourced responsibly but only around a third were correct in identifying that cork (30%) and natural rubber (34%) could be sourced from trees.

Tallulah Chapman, Communications Manager at the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) UK, who commissioned the study, commented, “FSC certification is now common-place in the wood and paper sectors, and it is fairly easy to find FSC-labelled products of this kind in the UK. FSC has continually developed over the 30 years since its foundation, expanding its tools to support more forest-dependent industries and forest-based products. The first FSC-certified garments are now starting to appear on the UK market, enabling shoppers to choose clothing made with viscose that supports responsible forestry.”

More than half of those surveyed look for certification labels when shopping for forest-based products, and 90% of those recognise the FSC logo. When thinking about shopping for products made from wood or paper, more people recall the FSC label than any other certification label. And when shown the logo itself, 79% of the more than 1,000 questioned, said they’d seen it before.

If you are one of the majority who would like to know that their purchases – be they made with wood, paper, cork, rubber, bamboo or a man-made cellulosic fibre, such as viscose – support responsible forestry, make sure to start by asking what things are made from. Looking for credible certification labels, relevant to the key materials with which a product is made, such as FSC for forest-based products, can be a relatively easy way to make sure than your actions meet your sustainable intentions.

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