

Product Stewardship Overload!

Why we should create a coordinated toolbox from the existing clutter of product stewardship, labelling and certification schemes

An opinion piece by Professor Alan Knight, CPSL Senior Associate

While organic food labelling started in the 1960s, it was the timber debate that first triggered the idea of product stewardship. In the late 1980s, growing recognition of the loss of tropical rainforests led to the creation of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), which delivered the closest solution: to provide an economic incentive for the sustainable harvesting of forests.

20 years later we have over 250 eco-labels and over 50 product stewardship bodies: is this too many? If the answer is yes, how many do we need and what makes them all different? If no, how many more, before there are too many?

There needs to be a fresh look at product stewardship. We should take a toolbox approach, assessing the issues where stewardship is part of the solution, and designing the optimum portfolio of schemes without unnecessary duplication or gaps.

A tool for the job, but how many jobs?

Retailers such as B&Q wanted one label for all timber products that would be independently certified against universally agreed standards. The FSC's underlying principle was to have all certification bodies working to one standard audit protocol, and displaying the same label for consumer and corporate buyers. However, some saw the FSC as too pressure group-focused and mistook it for a monopoly rather than the means to facilitate choice. They created their own schemes with a balance of power more suited to their preferences. Hence the nine major timber schemes – so in effect we have a toolbox with nine hammers. Then add schemes for oil palm and biofuels, other agricultural products, animal welfare, mine-related products, the built environment and tourism, people-centric schemes, umbrella-type supply chain schemes, single issue labels and individual brand initiatives, and we have well over 60 product stewardship, certification or labelling schemes.

How did we end up with such a heavy toolbox?

There was no planned approach. Sectors and their stakeholders focused on their own issues and product ranges. There were some schemes that were locked into their own issues or products, and some sectors felt that the leading certification scheme wasn't quite right for them. Other schemes wanted to cover a wider range of products, or were set up to help sectors reach a higher standard; others believed that there should be competing schemes within sectors, or felt that having a system which recognised a 'good, better, best' approach was more appropriate.

How the market uses the tools

So far we have three broad generic approaches:

- Good – the law, where nothing is available that flouts legislation;
- Better – choice editing, with high standards, but low enough to be achieved by the major companies;
- Best – informed consumer choice, with very high standards.

Introducing the toolbox approach

If we could create a stewardship council that covered all the world's products and issues, what would it look like?

- One adjustable tool for everything – but single labels have not succeeded, and cannot succeed.
- Have as many tools you want – however, there are already too many tools doing the same job, and other jobs which have no tools.
- A planned toolbox – if we started from scratch, we could have separate product stewardship councils that focus on their own chain of custody and marketing, relying on the responsible land and ocean bodies to check the harvesting of the resource. But the process, politics, cost and distraction of forcing it to happen would probably do more harm than good.
- 'The Knight toolbox' – this would use existing schemes, each of which would have a unique role within an organised toolbox with a tool for every job and a job for every tool. The tools required would cover: forests, agriculture, underground land use, oceans, fish and algae farms, tourist/ travel destinations, buildings, efficient use of energy and water, people's welfare, animal welfare. It would also incorporate the 'good, better and best' approach that most retailers use in defining ranges of similar products.

Even if there was momentum to solve this problem, there is neither the political will nor process to do this.

Conclusion and recommendations

While a matrix of 10 tools x 'good, better, best' is too simple, it does provide a template to identify the gaps and overlaps. What is required is a two-pronged approach:

- 1 A group of manufacturers and retailers need to agree that a managed toolbox for certification schemes has value for their needs, and for their supply chains and customers. Then they need to work together to formulate the process and content.
- 2 Certification bodies should work with each other and understand where on the 10x3 matrix they should be, and then to report on where there are overlaps and duplications, and where there are gaps.

It is a debate worth having.

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