

# Coffins: What Contributes to the Unethical Nature of the Global Coffin Supply Chain?

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By the end of 2020, it was estimated that 3 million people had died from COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2021). Innumerable industries were struggling to deal with death and the economic destruction caused by the virus. Yet, one industry found itself getting a boost from the disease – the funeral business. By the middle of 2020, the casket manufacturing industry had already increased by 5.1 per cent in the United States (IBIS World, 2023). By 2022, the USA industry had almost doubled its 2018 size (Anything Research, 2023). This lucrative market even prompted the creation of ‘start-ups’, making casket purchasing easier for grieving families (Miller, 2020; The Economic Times, 2021). Within a year of the pandemic, the price of an average funeral had increased by 30 per cent since the start of 2020 (Trusted Caskets, 2021).

However, the malpractice of the coffin industry goes beyond price hiking during the pandemic. The exploitation of workers by coffin manufacturers has also increased as a result of the pandemic-induced global disruption. In particular, the rainforest hardwood industry has continued to destroy ancient rainforests in many developing countries. But, given the common taboos about death, this exploitation remains relatively unspoken about and subsequently severely under-addressed. Hence, this essay attempts to start the conversation about the exploitative nature of the coffin industry and use the exploitative teak industry in the Solomon Islands to illustrate this. Furthermore, despite a lack of literature, this paper will attempt to outline what an ethical supply chain of coffins could look like. Ultimately, this paper highlights what contributes to the unethical global coffin supply chain: economic, environmental and emotional exploitation.

## The unethical supply chain of coffins

This first section outlines an attempt to map some of the most significant reasons why coffin supply is currently unethical. It outlines some of the ethical concerns connected to the forestry industry using the Solomon Islands as an example.

Funeral companies tend to push high-quality wood coffins and caskets onto emotionally vulnerable family members who would struggle with making informed choices due to their situation (Windle *et al.*, 2020). An increasingly popular coffin-type has been made of rainforest hardwood. The appeal of using rainforest hardwood is due to its durability, rich colour and the fact that it is relatively rare. But the rainforest wood industry has a long history of exploitation and environmental degradation. The harvesting of rainforest hardwoods often involves illegal logging, which is carried out by criminal organisations that have a disregard for environmental regulations and exploit local communities (World Wildlife Fund, n.d.). However, deforestation is also done by legitimate, usually international corporations in many developing countries. Whether illegal or legal, logging has had a devastating impact on communities who rely on the forests for their livelihoods and cultural practices.

Concerningly, there have been reports of an increase in rainforest logging during the COVID-19 pandemic, as economic uncertainty has made it easier for destructive loggers to operate (Golar *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, lockdowns and travel restrictions limited the ability of environmental organisations to monitor and

protect rainforests from illegal logging. Hence, many environmentalists are concerned about the extent of rainforest depletion that occurred during the pandemic (Fair, 2020). Simultaneously, the pandemic caused millions of deaths – leaving many in shock. This sudden grief that ‘coffin consumers’ experience leaves them emotionally vulnerable to manipulation (ACCC, 2021). This means many do not question the exorbitant price of coffins or where the materials for the coffin were sourced. Hence, the issue of ‘unsustainable coffins’ remains relatively unaddressed in many societies.

One example of this exploitation is the teak industry in the Solomon Islands. This industry has had significant impacts on the environment, economy and social wellbeing of local communities. Teak is a hardwood that is valued for its strength and beauty, making it a lucrative commodity in the global market. The teak industry in the Solomon Islands began in the 1960s and quickly became a significant source of revenue for the country. The rainforest climate of the Solomon Islands makes for effective teak production (ACAIR, 2018). The largest importers of Solomon Islands’ hardwood are China and Malaysia, and there is very little transparency around the processes undertaken by the corporations involved in this extractive industry. What is evident is that the logging of teak has had significant environmental impacts, including deforestation, soil erosion and water pollution.

Given that teak is not native, the industry in the Solomon Islands involves the mass clearing of natural forests, which has significant impacts on the environment. Clear-cutting leads to habitat destruction and fragmentation, which can have severe impacts on local wildlife and plant species (Katovai *et al.*, 2015). The removal of large areas of forest disrupts the ecological balance, as many species rely on intact forest habitats to survive. The loss of habitat can lead to a decline in biodiversity, as species struggle to adapt to the changes in their environment. The teak logging activities also have significant impacts on freshwater ecosystems, including streams and rivers, which are home to many species of fish that are an important food source for many in the Solomon Islands (Wenger *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, the logging activities also involve the use of heavy machinery and transport vehicles, which can damage the forest floor and soil structure.

Due to local and international pressure, the government of the Solomon Islands has implemented regulations to promote sustainable forestry practices and reduce the negative impacts of teak logging (Ministry of Forestry and Research for Solomon Islands, 2020). However, these efforts have been challenged by illegal logging and corruption in the industry. The increasingly ‘illegal’ nature of these industries also poses its own issues. The teak industry in the Solomon Islands has been associated with labour exploitation and human rights violations (Allen, 2011). Workers are often subjected to long working hours, low wages and hazardous working conditions. However, the country is still so heavily reliant on this industry that, despite logging being past sustainable yield since the 1980s, the Solomon Islands’ state continues to support this industry with lax regulation and incentives.

Thus, the Solomon Islands is the perfect case study for highlighting the grip that such extractive industries have on developing countries. Small, resource-dependent states are being destroyed through their contributions to coffin supply chains but are subservient to them to survive.

### **Is there a possibility of an ethical supply chain of coffins?**

In addition to the unethical nature of the supply-side of the coffin industry, this paper now explores the barriers to ethical supply of coffins from a consumer and manufacturer perspective. It outlines some of the more sustainable solutions proposed to the current coffin supply-chain configuration. However, the barriers to large-scale implementation of these solutions are presented.

As with many things in the Western world, sustainability has become trendy. To illustrate, Hillenden Inc – one of the biggest coffin manufacturers in the US – sold their coffin manufacturing company, Batesville Coffin Manufacturing co, in order to move to more ‘attractive markets such as plastics, food and recycling’ (Weaver, 2022). This highlights how coffin manufacturers, like many industries, are feeling pressure from the general consumer interest in sustainability. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities and exploitative nature of coffin supply chains. During the course of the pandemic, the coffin supply chain was adversely impacted by pandemic-relative national lockdowns and shortages in raw supplies, such as wood, due to the increased demand because of rising COVID-19 death tolls and other factors (MarketWatch, 2023). This, and increased demand, caused an increase in wood prices, and thus an overall increase in coffin prices, which was seen in Afghanistan during the height of the pandemic, as well as in India, showing the truly global effects of the pandemic on the industry (Tareen and Kakar, 2021; The Economic Times, 2021). Moreover, other stages in the supply chain, such as transportation, were also affected by the pandemic. This further exacerbated rising prices and demand for faster and more extractive practices.

As explored above, extractive logging has hastened environmental degradation. In the coffin-making industry, there is a larger demand on raw materials extraction compared to other supply chains due to the cultural, largely unquestioned monopoly wood has over other coffin materials, particularly in countries influenced by Christianity. Notably, there has been some interest in sustainable coffins from consumers, with 66 per cent of consumers desiring sustainable options, according to coffin manufacturer Lifelia (Lifelia, 2023). In addition, an article by CNN discusses the growing trend for environmentally friendly funerals, citing the example of a mushroom coffin from Netherlands-based sustainable coffin manufacturer Loop (Page, 2021). Thus, attempts at an ethical coffin supply chain have included biodegradable coffin options like Loop’s, as well as funeral providers opening the consumer up to a wider range of coffin material than what is more popularly advertised. Currently, in the UK, there are eco-friendly coffin suppliers – mostly small-scale independent coffin manufacturers who seek Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification to prove their use of ethical practices, supply-chain integrity, and that their processes have minimal environmental degradation (Forest Stewardship Council, n.d.). Larger corporations like JC Atkinson, which supplies 15 per cent of the coffins used in the UK, have gained this certification (Funeral Guide, 2017). This shift towards increasing sustainability is something that has been replicated in developing countries with Oasis Coffins, located in Bangladesh (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022). Oasis Coffins uses materials such as willow, bamboo and seagrass, all of which are readily available to the company, as well as environmentally friendly in different ways and so more sustainable options (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022). Other sustainable practices by Oasis Coffins include traceable supply chains, making it easier to monitor and reduce the environmental impact, as well as a non-exploitative working environment (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022). However, demand for sustainable coffins, such as those of Oasis Coffins and Loop, is relatively low, partly as ‘consumers are not aware [of sustainable options]’ (Page, 2021). Thus, with limited sustainable coffins and large demand for coffins overall, the extractive practices of this industry continue in order to meet the demand.

In addition, the effects of COVID-19 still linger today, as coffin demand increased greatly in rural China at the start of 2023 due to Coronavirus-related deaths – showing that the effects of Coronavirus on the funeral industry remain (McDonnell, 2023). Therefore, there needs to be encouragement from influential governments and companies for more transparent and sustainable supply chains and ethical working practices, as the above examples have illustrated that there are alternatives. Although this can be seen as slow moving, a good example of government legislation pushing companies to act is the South African coffin manufacturer Moxwood, who convinced their suppliers to become FSC certified due to increasing UK requirements for such

certification, which their competition had begun to comply with – the UK being one of their biggest consumer markets at the time (Uke, 2014). This shows how governments implementing their own national regulations can influence the international market: even if as a result of competition fears, change can be driven. Such national regulations could be bolstered in order to help combat the corruption and illegal logging in the Solomon Islands, which was mentioned earlier. This is, for example, as if the UK legislated total FSC certification, and other states were to do something similar, there would be little to no room for the corruption and illegal logging practices which take place in the Solomon Islands. Finally, legislation and regulation are improved and held up by transparent supply chains. Therefore, an ethical global coffin supply chain can be maintained with better national and international legislation to promote increased transparency, which would reduce human and environmental exploitation, and an increase in sustainable coffin options by manufacturers to therefore increase customer insight into sustainable coffin options.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, extensive logging practices and ambiguous supply-chain practices, environmentally, economically and socially, mean that it is the small resource-dependent states, such as the Solomon Islands, that are exploited and subservient to the demands of others in order to economically survive, making the global coffin supply chain wholly unethical and unsustainable. It is acknowledged that there were some limitations of this research, including the limited discussion of different funeral cultures. However, much like other aspects of this industry, limited prior research means there is scarce accessible information about different practices. It is posited that more research is needed to begin to address the unethical nature of this stigmatised supply chain. Such research should include the mapping of coffin supply from the treatment of workers in logging-dependent communities like the Solomon Islands, to the emotional tactics used by coffin suppliers, as well as continuing research into sustainable coffin options globally.

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