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Saving the pernambuco tree

Posted Wed, 21 Sep 2011 21:05:01 GMT by [Jessica Allan](#)

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It is not often that the worlds of music and nature conservation join together, but it seems that there is a cause which directly concerns them both- trees. More specifically, the dwindling numbers of the pernambuco tree due to deforestation and land use change in Brazil.

The heartwood of this tree has been used to craft the finest bows for violins, cellos and double basses for professional musicians for over 250 years. The wood has qualities which makes it ideal for creating high quality bows, for example its rigidity, flexibility and density enables it to hold a fixed curve.

The survival of this tree is threatened by the continuing encroachment on its native habitat, and this has prompted the formation of the International Pernambuco Conservation Initiative (IPCI). The IPCI was created by bow makers in order to raise funds for research programmes, replanting initiatives and educational outreach.

Part of the fund raising effort is the publication of 'The Conservation, Restoration and Repair of Stringed Instruments and Their Bows', a comprehensive, three-volume book written by over 120 contributors. The book was edited by Tom Wilder, a Canadian violin-maker and restorer and historian of stringed instruments, and all the profits will go towards IPCI projects.

Wilder has dedicated ten years to the creation of this book, which is intended to be the definitive guide for the industry, and this hard work (as well the contributions from the world's leading experts) seems to have paid off; the book has had excellent reviews. The project highlights the cultural importance of trees- the pernambuco tree has been instrumental in creating some of the most exquisite music of the last centuries.

One of the most interesting aspects of projects like the IPCI, which is concentrated on the conservation of one tree species, is whether such a focussed scheme is the most effective approach towards conservation. It could be argued that being so focussed on a single species might be a disproportionate way to spend money and effort. However on a pragmatic level, using an iconic species can be a successful way to raise awareness and inspire people to donate money.

For example, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) uses the tiger and panda as flagship species to inspire people to care about environmental issues and this seems to give their campaigns a certain resonance. The pernambuco tree might not have quite the same appeal as cute and cuddly mammals, but its plight should surely strike a chord with musicians and music fans. For more information on the IPCI project, visit their website; www.ipci-canada.org