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So, I have a Taylor guitar and have researched sustainable tree species from Africa used in building musical instruments. I couldn't resist sharing this with the group. Instrument manufacturers have a vested interest in following this type of model. Regards, Rich

BUSINESS INSIDER

Taylor Guitars took a big risk by investing in an African sawmill — but according to the company's co-founder, it was a great move

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<https://www.businessinsider.com/taylor-guitars-ebony-project-2018-8>

Better Capitalism



Taylor co-founder Bob Taylor. Taylor

- San Diego-based [Taylor Guitars](#) has made a substantial investment in a sawmill in Cameroon to provide the innovative company with a sustainable supply of an essential wood, ebony.
- Under co-founder and President Bob Taylor's leadership, the company upgraded the sawmill to a high level of craftsmanship.
- Acoustic guitar companies are at the leading edge of sustainability in this respect because they use so many exotic and monitored woods in their instruments.
- This article is part of Business Insider's ongoing series on [Better Capitalism](#).

It's like something out of a movie: a seasoned entrepreneur and environmentally conscious leader decides to buy and transform a sawmill in Cameroon.

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But if anybody was going to undertake such a daunting project, it would be Bob Taylor, who in 1974 decided that there was room for another major American guitar manufacturer. His ambition back then was considered by many to be quixotic at best and foolhardy at worst.

The American high-end acoustic guitar scene has long been dominated by two companies: Pennsylvania-based C.F. Martin & Co.; and Tennessee's Gibson. Other US-based guitar brands came and went, rose and fell. Names such as Guild and Ovation. But until San Diego's Taylor Guitars came on the scene, it was a two-horse race.

For several decades now, Taylor has been the third and youngest pony. Lacking Martin's pre-Civil War legacy and Gibson's iconic and eye-catching designs, the company has [made its mark with innovation](#). Among professional musicians, Taylor's reputation is stupendous.



Taylor's master guitar maker, Andy Powers. Taylor

Like all makers of expensive, high-end acoustic guitars (Taylor also sells cheaper instruments), the company is up against a fundamental constraint when it comes to raw materials. The long-ago established Lacey Act prohibits the trade of endangered natural materials, including exotic woods. Gibson ran afoul of the law a few years ago.

In Taylor's case, the critical wood is ebony, sourced from West Africa's Congo Basin. It goes into every guitar that Taylor makes. Bob Taylor was determined to obtain it in a just and sustainable manner, but he also saw an opportunity to embed his company more deeply with the community in Cameroon. For him and for Taylor, it was simply better capitalism, and they were prepared to shoulder the risk.

A business opportunity presents itself

Enter the sawmill, called Crelicam, located in Cameroon's capital, Yaoundé. The mill is a jointly owned facility — Taylor bought it together with a Spanish supplier, Madinter, in 2011.

"We got a call from our colleagues in Madrid," Taylor recalled. "It was presented to me as a business opportunity."

Ultimately, Taylor and Madinter would turn Crelicam into an updated version of what Taylor characterized as an American sawmill from the 1950s, focused on craftsmanship, right down to vintage saws that had to be restored.

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That was over seven years ago, and Taylor's timing was perfect. Issues around sustainability have only intensified, and Taylor has documented its commitment to Cameroon in a series called "[The Ebony Project](#)."

"The water heating up slowly, but it will soon boil," Taylor said. "In 2007, we made 100 guitars a day. But we make 750 now. With ebony, we're at the heart of the heart of the heart of the matter. So we bought this business and decided to make it right with all the pain and suffering involved. It's turned out to be fantastic."

One might reasonably ask if Taylor could have used something other than ebony, but according to Bob Taylor, the company had to find a solution with the favored material, which he said he's relied on for years to make premium instruments.

The guitar business has found itself understandably on the leading edge of a pressure wave for sustainability.

Making the most of ebony



Ebony goes into every guitar Taylor makes. Taylor

"One of the first sectors to be affected was acoustic guitar manufacturing," said, Scott Paul, Taylor's Director of Natural Resource Sustainability since early 2017 and a veteran of environmental organizations, such as Greenpeace. "Guitars are a composite of different species from all around the world."

One might logically ask if Taylor could use something other than ebony, but Bob Taylor dismissed that idea.

"It's the same circus, different tent," he said (Taylor is nothing if not a colorful and

outspoken leader — not exactly a maverick, but a guy who knows his own mind and isn't afraid to speak it). "With ebony, it's the favored wood. We've relied on it for years to make good instruments."

In terms of working with ebony in Cameroon, Taylor has updated its sawmill to be both a throwback to the fifties and a model of manufacturing, circa 2018. Seven years into the project, Crelicam now keeps workers dry by preventing rain from leaking in and the electricity is reliable. Wages for workers are also up.

According to Bob Taylor, the company is also able to maximize its ebony usage, as well, by using wood that has color in it (a perfect ebony guitar fretboard, in the eyes of some, should be an unbroken strip of black).

Some manufacturers could sell that rejected ebony for 75 cents per fretboard, but Taylor uses it, believing that it can add a visual dimension to some instruments. It's certainly better than taking only the perfect ebony from felled trees and leaving flawed material on the forest floor.



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Why wealth is found in waste

"Your wealth is in your waste," Bob Taylor said.

Paul added that for the industry, the reality with ebony from this part of Africa is that the resource has been exported in an unprocessed form. But Taylor is doing the opposite.

"Our investment is in the country," he said. "We're bringing more value-added processing to Cameroon."

And for Bob Taylor, who turned 63 this year, the investment sends a clear message. "This wood brings jobs," he said. "Rather than this wood is just extracted."

Taylor's reputation for innovation has in this case resisted restlessness and settled into a long-term commitment to Cameroon. Bob Taylor explained that when some companies consider a 50-year plan, they have no concept of what it will be. But in his field, he made some sage predictions.

"I know what a guitar will be in 50 years," he said. "And by making this investment in wood, I believe that that our company will still be here. I'm OK with delayed gratification."

SEE ALSO: Taylor's radical new acoustic guitar design proves that a centuries-old musical instrument can be high-tech

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