

Screw cap wine bottles threaten rare species

The trend for buying wine sealed with screw caps is threatening to kill off one of Europe's most important habitats.

By Richard Gray, Science Correspondent
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Cork oak forests, which cover 2.7 million of hectares worldwide and support rare species such as Iberian lynx, black storks and booted eagles, are already disappearing in some areas.

Faced with falling demand for cork stoppers, which make up 70 per cent of the income from cork harvests, farmers are ripping up trees that have been on their land for hundreds of years in an attempt to grow alternative crops, such as eucalyptus.



The removal of cork oak forests threatens rare species such as the Iberian Lynx Photo: PA

The land that cork oaks grow on, however, is poor quality and when the trees are removed, the land often turns into desert. In the Algarve, Portugal, cork forests have declined by 28 per cent in the past 10 years.

A study by conservation charity The World Wildlife Fund estimated that up to three quarters of the Mediterranean's cork forests could be lost within 10 years if the trend for plastic stoppers and screw tops continues, and a new BBC *Natural World* documentary, will next month highlight the threats facing the forests and warn they could vanish completely unless wine makers switch back to using real corks.

"Cork oak forests have been maintained in the seven countries in the world where they exist because of their economic value," said Nora Berrahmouni, head of the forest unit at the WWF's Mediterranean program. "They have such a rich biodiversity that in just 0.1 of a hectare of forest there are more than 100 certified species. Without the trees, the ecosystem will change and that will speed the degradation of the landscape."

Cork was once the main source for wine bottle stoppers, and is harvested from the trees by stripping off the bark by hand using traditional axes. Cork oaks, which take 45 years to reach maturity at which point they can begin to be harvested, are the only trees that can survive having the majority of their bark stripped off. It takes nine years before a tree can be harvested again, but each tree produces enough

cork in each harvest for 4,000 wine bottles.

Problems, however, with bottles of wine becoming "corked", where the wine develops a musty smell becomes undrinkable due to contamination with a chemical known as Trichloroanisol, have turned many consumers off natural corks.

New World wine producers have led the way in switching to screw cap wine bottles and synthetic corks in a bid to overcome the problem, and now synthetic closures account for more than 20 per cent of the market.

The cork industry in Portugal is now attempting to fight back and has introduced new sterilisation and purification methods for ensuring their corks are not contaminated with Trichloroanisol.

In Portugal, cork forests cover nearly 33 per cent of the countries land mass. They are home to rare species including black storks and booted eagles, both of which only nest in cork oaks.

Secretive Iberian lynx, the world's most endangered big cat, rely upon the open, scattered structure of the forests for hunting. European Cranes also migrate to the forests from the north to feed on the acorns produced by the trees.

"The public don't realise the impact that a simple decision like buying a bottle of wine can have," said Paul Morrison, assistant producer of the Natural World documentary.

"If the farmers cannot sell the cork the trees produce, then these unique habitats will be lost along with many of the species they support."

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