

Are Books Enviro-Friendly?

By Danny Adlerman, Production Manager, LEE & LOW BOOKS

We are so pleased that the environment is finally taking a position of importance in today's social and political climates. We are of course concerned about what has led to this, and as both consumers and producers we are cognizant of our responsibilities . . . and we try hard to do the right thing.

The topic of books and the environment comes up periodically, but more so recently. We thought we would help to shed some light on some relevant facts you might want to know:

First and foremost, the books that we make are intended to last for years, and in most cases, you can literally expect a book's life to exceed your own. People do not tend to throw away picture books, and especially not hardcovers. We still have books from our childhood, and we're willing to bet that a good number of you folks do too! The books we produce are not beach throwaways and do not fall apart after one or two readings, they are not printed on newsprint, and it is not expected that they will end up in landfills (including our paperbacks, by the way). Picture books are keepsakes, plain and simple.

Second, the paper used in the manufacturing process comes from trees that are specifically grown for this purpose—they come from tree farms. They are NOT old growth. They do NOT come from rain forests. Imagine the folly of cutting down old growth or rain forests for this purpose. Even from a business perspective this would be simply ludicrous, for it would cost a huge amount more to get the wood and pulp required; and once it's gone, it's gone. Tree farms feature fast-growing, replenishable trees that are less expensive to log and maintain, and easier to implement into an industrialized setting. It makes as much business sense as it does environmental sense to utilize young, hardy, less expensive, and renewable resources!

Third, there is as much misinformation as fact floating around on this topic, and frankly more than meets the eye. For example, most people think that if a product is made of recycled paper, it is paper that was used before, presumably for a similar product or use as it is currently. However, there are governmental standards in place for what can be called "recycled" versus what cannot. In fact, paper emanating from a product that was previously used in its final form is what's known as postconsumer waste: that is, this paper was already a product that was used and discarded.

There is another resource, however, called preconsumer waste, that utilizes fibers, pulp, and similar by-products created in the paper-making process that did not make it into a previously used product. It is a legitimate component in recycled stock, but papers made with it cannot be called “recycled” unless a certain percentage of postconsumer waste is included in the final mix. One issue is that these standards are subject to change. Some years ago, a paper made of merely 20 percent preconsumer waste was enough to be considered recycled; a few years later, it became a mix of 40 percent postconsumer plus 10 percent preconsumer. Not all recycled papers are inclusive of the same mix.

Fourth, and this is particularly relevant, papers that have been printed on before must be de-inked. This is especially the case with papers printed on using color inks. There is a by-product of this process, even if oxidation rather than bleaching is used. The ink has to go somewhere; it doesn't cease to exist! Where does it go to? Is it in our atmosphere? Perhaps our soil? Maybe our water supply? Yes, yes, yes. Does this mean we should NOT use postconsumer waste products because of the fear that we are trading one evil for another? Of course not. It means we must be cognizant of our choices, and we must strike a balance with our planet just like we should do with every other aspect of our lives. Some recycled. Some preconsumer. Some postconsumer. And only in the right products!

Additionally, you may be interested to know that fibers themselves have only a certain lifespan. Did you know that paper fibers can be broken down a maximum of six times before they lose their integrity (i.e., before they become unusable)?

Some other aspects of book manufacturing are more straightforward: Most boards used for binding, in particular one board made right here in the U.S.A, contain at least some recycled content; some others are made exclusively of recycled fibers. Again, it makes as much business sense to use waste and by-products that have already been paid for as it makes environmental sense!

Many inks, too, are now made from a soy-based substrate rather than from petroleum. This is especially the case here in the United States, but it has been introduced overseas and is becoming more common with each passing year in many other countries.

In the long run, there is no getting around certain facts: We make books, and they are made from ink and paper. However, we stand proudly behind certain other facts at the same time: We are aware of the processes

involved and do our best to take our stewardship of the earth and our responsibility to the planet seriously. Most importantly, we are informed. Now, you are too!

Peace, Danny

About our Production Manager: Danny Adlerman leads a life completely devoted to children in one form or another. When he is not producing books for us at LEE & LOW, he is writing books and making music for children. Most importantly, he is Daddy to three children of his own. Visit Danny's Web site at dannyandkim.com.

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