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## Cork forests at risk from switch to screw-top wine



By **Steve Connor**, Science Editor  
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Up to three quarters of the unique cork oak forests of the Mediterranean could be lost within 10 years because of the increasing popularity of the screw-top wine bottle.

The move away from traditional stoppers made of cork threatens the survival of one of Europe's most important wildlife habitats, according to a study by the conservation group WWF.

If the trend for plastic stoppers and screw tops continues, then just 5 per cent of wine bottles sold in Britain in 2015 could be using corks, the report says.

WWF - formerly the Worldwide Fund for Nature - is lobbying for the wine industry to reverse its headlong rush to screw tops and plastic stoppers in the hope of preserving a man-made habitat that is rich in wildlife.

Environmentalists argue that the projected demise of the Mediterranean cork oak forests will result in the loss of 62,500 jobs as well as a habitat loved by the endangered Iberian lynx, the Barbary deer, the black vulture and the imperial Iberian eagle.

"The cork oak forests could face an economic and environmental crisis unless we take action to secure their future now," said Rebecca May, WWF's forests campaigner. "It is vital that the wine and cork industries maintain the market for cork stoppers and in turn help ensure the survival of the cork oak forests," she said.

The bark of the cork oak can be harvested from the trunk for decades without damaging the tree. The oak trees are managed in such a way that the forests are rich in insects, birds, reptiles and mammals.

"In cork oak landscapes, plant diversity can reach a level of 135 species per square metre, and many of these species have aromatic, culinary or medicinal uses," the WWF report says.

Cork has been used to plug wine bottles since the days of Dom Perignon, a French monk who experimented with cork stoppers for his sparkling wine in the early 17th century.

In recent years, however, the wine industry has moved away from cork in favour of plastic or screw tops. One survey found that between 2000 and 2005, the proportion of wine bottles stoppered with cork fell by 18 per cent - a loss of 3 billion cork stoppers out of a total market of 15 billion.

Supermarkets and wine retailers complained of a rise in the incidence of cork taint, a mouldy taste sometimes given to wine by a chemical occasionally produced by some corks. They claim the problem has got worse which is why they are moving to synthetic tops.

WWF says that the decline in the market for cork will make many of the family-owned businesses in Portugal, Spain, France and Italy uneconomical, with the result that the trees will either be abandoned or uprooted.

It warns that 2 million hectares - an area half the size of Switzerland - could be affected, leading to an increased risk of the unmanaged habitats being destroyed by forest fires, drought or desertification.

Nora Berrahmouni, who co-ordinates the WWF's cork oak landscape programme, said that once the forests were abandoned because they were uneconomic, it would be difficult or impossible to bring them back.

"A whole landscape, which has environmental as well as economic importance for the western Mediterranean, is at risk," she said. "We need to take action now so we don't lose this unique landscape forever."

In addition to resident animals, cork oak forests provide protection for millions of migratory birds - including kites, storks and common cranes - as they fly to and from Africa.

## Centuries of tradition

By **Mark Dearn**

- \* The first recorded use of cork as a stopper is attributed to the Ancient Egyptians
- \* Widespread usage began when Dom P?rignon swapped the traditional conical plugs - wooden stoppers wrapped in olive oil-soaked hemp - for cork.
- \* A single wine cork can have 800 million tightly packed cells made from a complex fatty acid called suberin, which prevents water from penetrating tissue.
- \* Yearly losses to the wine and cork industry from cork taint are estimated to be about £684m.