



Wood Pathway: Niche Wood Products

In contrast to traditional saw-log based forest products, niche wood products offer secondary options for a high value end-use to forest management.

“Niche products tend to be specialty, higher-value, non-commodity wood products that are directed at specific markets that value the unique appearance/quality of a product that has a limited production supply. These are usually products that an end-user believes has an added-value component due to unique appearance/quality, end-use, etc...” (Nat Res Canada, Canada Wood, 2003)

The advantages of this business model are to distinguish yourself from your competitors. It is one of the most powerful ways to focus your marketing efforts and chisel out a piece of the market for yourself that is free from million-dollar mass marketing campaigns directed by industry tycoons. By offering a product directly meeting the needs of the customer, often times, niche wood products sell at a higher price. For this reason niche products are highly adaptable to the commodity market

There are several ways to identify a niche wood market including:

- Targeting a specific industry or business type
- Targeting a demographic group
- Targeting a specific aspect of work
- Choosing a specific style of service or product



Building with Salvaged or Hazard Trees

As wildfires are expected to continue over the foreseeable future, post-fire tree stands can lose their integrity and become hazards to nearby buildings, roads or powerlines. With CAL FIRE prioritizing more hazard tree removal for the safety of the county, a business set up to receive culled, salvaged or hazard trees can be advantageous. Businesses like LA-based Urban Logs to Lumber processes fallen trees on site and distribute the material to fine woodworkers or furniture builders.

https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/home_blog/2012/03/salvaged-wood-furniture.html



Building with Tan Oak

The most ambitious business model for the Sonoma region is the all too abundant TanOak. This specie has caused consternation throughout the region for many years for its inability to be produced on a mass scale. However, this gives the niche wood product entrepreneur an advantage. Here is a testimony from the Willits News published in 2016:

Estok Menton, of Menton Builders in Ukiah, spoke of a grant proposal he wrote in the 1970s, in an effort to create a business model using tanoak. He envisioned “an entire hierarchy of wonderful products,” ranging from small-scale cabinet paneling to flooring...[Menton] spoke about competition from imported goods, much of it formaldehyde-infused particleboard from China. He criticized the “extractive economic model” that removed large redwood trees and created the conditions for tanoak to flourish. His goal, he said, was to create a rural economy where carpenters and builders could have “value-added jobs’ by working with ‘the most abundant native California hardwood we had.” (Willits News)

Research and industry creatives have seen the best potential for TanOak through its strength, thereby making flooring, stair treads, butcherblock and furniture as the most promising products to begin production. UC Agricultural and Natural Resource Cooperative Extension conducted a report highlighting Tanoak’s potential to enter the commercial and niche wood markets (UCANR). Below is a brief profile of the wood characteristics studied at Oregon State University’s Wood Science and Engineering department.

- Highly rated for its strength properties. It is noted for its hardness, resistance to abrasion, bending strengths and stiffness according to Oregon State University’s Wood Science and Engineering department.
- Tanoak lumber requires special care and well-controlled conditions during drying to properly lower MC without causing excessive degrade
- Tanoak can stain if certain metals contact the wet wood; contact with iron can produce a pronounced blue-black discoloration. Molds and bacterial stains will develop if air circulation around the wet lumber is inadequate. Proper air-drying of tanoak requires very mild conditions, with moderate temperatures and high humidity, to avoid developing molds and bacterial stains.



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1. <https://www.willitsnews.com/2016/08/02/tanoak-mostly-an-artisanal-product/>
 2. “Does it make Cents to Process Tanoak to Lumber”. UC ANR Oaks. 2001. <https://oaks.cnr.berkeley.edu/does-it-make-cents-to-process-tanoak-to-lumber/>