

Ethical sourcing of crystals ©

For those of you who have been to a spiritual market or fayre recently, you probably saw the trays and trays of crystals and jewellery on sale. I've bought plenty of healing crystals in the past and not always given much thought to where these stones come from, unless it's a particularly rare or valuable item. The following article is not a polemic on what we, as pagans, must do, but it does raise some questions to ask when we buy crystals in future.

Fair Trade products

With regard to Fair Trade (FT) stuff, there is both good news and bad news. The good news is that it is possible to buy lots of items that are validated by the FT organisations with the label, eg:

- Coffee, tea and cocoa
- Sugar
- Bananas and other fresh fruit
- Wine
- Honey
- Chocolate
- Cotton.

The bad news is that no gemstones or healing crystals have been certified as FT: the only precious metals that are FT are gold and silver. Any buyer should ask a trader about a product's origin. Platinum is not FT at present, but it is possible to source ethically recycled platinum for jewellery.



Pagans need to be aware that many traders devise their own standards to label ethical crystals or stones. Such standards may be based on international guidelines, but there is no inspection or third party quality audit of these schemes.

What are the ethical problems with crystals and gems?

The main reason why crystals and gems are not included in the FT standard is due to the fact that every mine operates differently because of:

- Types of stones mined
- Geography of the local area
- Local climate
- Traditional mining methods of the sourcing area, eg on a small scale with only a few people.

If you want to buy crystals or gems for, say, magickal healing or altar decoration, it is worth checking for the following information from the trader.

1. Are the stones sourced from organisations that work with small-scale miners?
2. Do these mines avoid the use of child labour?
3. Do these mines use workers of both sexes?
4. Are the source organisations dedicated to educating the smaller mines on proper health and safety methods?
5. Are the methods of mining safe?
6. Are the mines located in environmentally safe areas, ie not national parks?
7. Are the mines located in areas of recent wars?
8. After mining is completed, will the sourcing agent restore and replant the mine sites. For example, when sapphire mines in Australia were exhausted, the sourcing organisation there (Columbia Gem House), ensured that the site was restored to grassland for farming.

Note: if the trader cannot give you these answers, then it's *caveat emptor*, but I would suggest that crystals of uncertain provenance are less good for healing.

Environmental concerns

Any FT standard looks at protection for the environment, during mining, cutting, and jewellery manufacturing.

Unlike mining for most minerals, gems are usually mined by hand as small hand-held tools minimise the lasting impact on the local environment. A gemstone miner is much more likely to use a shovel or a basket than an earthmover.

Most small-scale mine workers live near the mine workings and it is important that any mine leaves as much vegetation (as possible) untouched to reduce the impact on wildlife habitat. This is another point that should be checked by the sourcing agent. A mining operation moves a lot of earth and rock, but streams and aquifers need protection too, as do marine life.

Human rights protection

If possible, the trader should be asked whether the source agent for the stones can guarantee fair dealing for the miners and workers in the cutting shops, ie:

- No child labour
- Minimum wages
- Good health and safety, eg dust control in the cutting areas
- Comfortable working conditions
- Training and qualification of skilled workers
- Equal opportunities.

Some sourcing agents go much further than these basic rights. For example, the sourcing company built a school for the children of workers at the **Chimwadzulu Mine** in Malawi (where a rare ruby is mined). With an attendance roll of 950, it also provides needed educational services for all the village children. Non-agricultural work is rare in this part of Malawi and infrastructure is almost non-existent. Other sourcing agents look toward their workers' health and provide small medical clinics, build freshwater wells and replant forests.

Product integrity

The road from a gem being taken from the earth to display in a shop or trade fair is not straightforward. Most buyers are aware that many crystals are either dyed or grown in a laboratory, but there are other links in the supply chain that can be checked before purchase. A dealer should be able to guarantee the integrity of each stone, ie:

- Quality
- Location of the mine –some dealers operate a strict chain of custody, to assure customers of the path of a stone from mine to shop
- How the gem has been cut or faceted
- Whether the stone has been enhanced in any way, eg heating to improve colour – this often occurs with rubies and sapphires
- Whether any synthetic substances have been mixed in the stone – this is particularly true with quartz
- Some stones are mixed with glass or via a process known as fracture filling to add synthetics
- It is possible to ask a dealer for an origin report on a valuable stone and a scientist can look for clues to a gem's origin.

Note: for this reason, many crystal healers prefer to either forage for their own crystals or buy rough, untreated stones.

Commercial ethics

It is important to show the link to the mine for lots of reasons – as a crystal healer, I feel that a link with the environment of the mine adds to the energy of the crystal. Many people know that coffee comes from Colombia, but how many know that some of the best rubies and sapphires come from Malawi?

The actual export chain process can be demonstrated by a crystal dealer via a complete chain of custody documentation for each stone. Thus, all transactions and transfers of goods and monies are handled in a legal and transparent manner, according to local laws.

Any shipments into the UK should include an official invoice that shows real and accurate values. The official invoice is also used to remit payment by online banking or bank order to an official bank account supplied by the supplier. Such papers help to avoid the scam of buying gems as part of money laundering.

The *Earth to Pocket* initiative emphasises the importance of sourcing crystals that already have clean energy rather than using running water, sage or moonlight to cleanse new crystals. Similar to the Seed to Plate organic food movement, *Earth to Pocket* dealers buy tumbled stones directly from mine owners/ gem tumblers who can verify the origin of their products and mining conditions.

Diamonds

So, the problem of sourcing gems ethically is quite difficult, but this issue does not arise for diamonds, due to the [Kimberley Process Certification Scheme](#), which aims to identify conflict or blood diamonds. The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) was created by the UN in 2002, after a meeting of South African diamond producing states in 2000 in the town of Kimberley, the capital of the Northern Cape in South Africa.

The scheme is designed to prevent conflict diamonds from entering legitimate jewellery supply chains, so we can know that the diamonds we're using aren't blood diamonds. Around 47 countries have signed up to the KPCS, including all member countries of the EU.

Under the KPCS, any country which is part of the scheme has to ensure the following protocols.

1. All diamond mining is strictly supervised and that diamonds in their rough or uncut or polished state can only be transferred between participating countries in tamper-proof containers and with proper documentation.
2. Every diamond export is accompanied by a KPCS certificate, proving that any diamond originating from that country does not finance a rebel group or other faction seeking to overthrow a UN-recognised government.
3. The country must also ensure that no diamonds are imported to or exported from a country or state that is not a member of the KPCS - every packet of diamonds is tracked from the mine to the point of cutting.
4. Of course, there have been problems as the KPCS is self-enforced by member countries, but official observers include the World Diamond Council.

An example of a KPCS loophole happened in 2004 when the Republic of Congo was expelled from the scheme, No mining took place in the Republic of Congo, but the country allowed the passage of smuggled diamonds from Angola and Democratic Republic of Congo. Still, the KPCS covers almost 100% of the global diamond trade and continues to work to improve conditions for diamond workers in less developed countries.

Conclusion

Is there a real conclusion here? Actually, it's all down to you or, put another way, it's in the consumer education process. There's a lot of stuff out there online or from dealers in the way of educational brochures about types of stones and how they're produced. If you want to source ethical stones, it's important to understand some of the quality issues and to ask questions about the origin of stones.

If you insist on FT coffee, bananas or other products, why not think about applying such standards to healing crystals? Your questions will prompt dealers to review the origin of stones and work back up the chain to environmental sustainability, fair wages and better conditions for the workers. Just think – a small change in your purchasing behaviour can make a big difference in the future.

Or you can do what I do. OK, I do buy rough stones at rock and gem fairs, but there's also a lot that can be obtained by **foraging in the UK**, just as some of us forage for herbal materials. Common crystals that can be found around our country include:

- Garnet
- Agate
- Jasper
- Amethyst
- Smoky quartz
- Aquamarine
- Hematite
- Calcite
- Jet
- Amber
- Topaz
- Tourmaline
- Fluorite and Blue John fluorite
- A few gemstones, eg diamonds, sapphires and beryls

I spend a lot of time in Devon and it's worth remembering that this used to be the centre of copper, silver and tin mining in pre-Roman times, just as the South Downs were heavily mined for flints. It is not difficult to walk along the beach and look for rocks with quartz or calcite inlays. Jet, for example, used to be common around Whitby, as was agate along that part of the coast. Further south, the Isle of Wight was known for its amber.