Eco-friendly lumber from submerged forests arrives in the Southland.

**WATER LOGGING**

By Jennifer Lague

It's rare that the origins of newly milled 2-by-4s offer a compelling tale. But the boards, beams and planks that Triton Logging Inc. sells to home builders come from the cold, eerie depths of Canadian reservoirs. There, a remote-controlled chainsaw-wielding submarine called a Sunfish, developed by Triton's founder and chief executive, Chris Godshall, harvests trees killed by 20th century dam projects. Although the robotic lumberjack may conjure images of Jules Verne's primitive Nautilus, its mission is to dive 200 feet down in search of new sources of cedar, pine, spruce and Douglas fir.

The pilot sits in a barge on the surface, scanning multiple video screens to navigate the underwater landscape, a dark, surreal scene in which submerged trees look as though they've been frozen in time with bark and pine cones intact. Using a joystick, the Sunfish operator ties a canvass float to each tree, the saw cuts through its base and the tree rockets to the surface.

The wood has been preserved by the dark, oxygen-poor water, and once it is kiln-dried, it can be used as architectural-grade, old-growth lumber for purposes including support beams and **[See Triton, Page K11]**
Logging beneath water’s surface

[From page K11] custom cabinetry. Triton, a small Canadian company based near Victoria, British Columbia, has offered its lumber to builders mainly on a limited, customer-order basis and has had trouble meeting the growing demand for its products in Canada and the U.S. Much of what they produce has been used for Canadian greenhouse projects, though some has been made its way to construction projects in Southern California.

Since 2004, Triton has harvested trees from two reservoirs in British Columbia, Odessa Lake and Lake Vytik, with an aggressive plan to help the school of sawmill and expand production, and with 45,600 untapped submerged forests in the world, Goddall intends to distribute wood products to the public through the company’s website at www.tritonlogging.com within a year. In five years, he hopes to be operating on five continents. It’s a part of a national trend in which the green-building marketplace is becoming broader and more sophisticated in its offerings as the homeowner’s public is becoming more interested in buying ecologically friendly products, said Alex Wilson, the president and chief executive of BuildingGreen Inc. The Vermont-based firm publishes newsletters and books on green building — the practice of increasing the efficiency with which buildings and their sites use energy, water and materials, and minimizing the effect on human health and the environment.

Pro-conservation sentiment

Even Home Depot is seeing eco-friendliness as a viable market. The store now offers an “Eco Options” labeling system, which helps consumers identify products, such as compact fluorescent light bulbs and items made with sustainable forest wood, that have less of an effect on the environment than competing ones.

In developing Triton, Goddall, who has a background as a marketing consultant, felt he was tapping into a pro-conservation consumer sentiment.

“There are a lot of people out there who want to feel good about what they own,” Goddall said. "They want to know that what they’re buying is not destroying the environment."

Goddall hopes that Triton’s products, which include bass lumber, wood paneling and finished furniture, will satisfy the requirements of even the most rigorous eco-conscious shoppers.

As “redesigned” wood, Triton products are certified by the Rainforest Alliance’s Smart Wood program. The Rainforest Alliance, which runs the Smart Wood program, employs tough standards to make sure that the wood it certifies has been harvested in an environmentally responsible way.

Triton wood qualifies for this certification for several reasons. Since its wood is already dead, the company is not destroying live forests, which provide habitat for wildlife and absorb carbon dioxide, a gas that would otherwise contribute to global warming.

“We don’t disturb fish habitat,” Goddall also points out, because an underwater forest is not a natural marine habitat. Also, Triton’s harvesting has little effect on the surrounding ecosystem since the company uses roads and infrastructure already in place around the reservoirs and the underwater operation makes less noise than above-ground methods.

Since it is difficult to obtain high-quality old-growth timber without damaging the environment, green builders are welcoming Triton’s expansion.

Robert Thiele, a San Diego architect, said he looked at a lot of wood before he custom-ordered Triton’s Douglas fir poles. He used them as support for the roof of a multimillion-dollar house he is building in La Jolla for a client.

"The wood is special because the material has been suspended in time; the grains are very tight," he said. "I’m not sure how to get poles like that out of regular lumber yards.”

Although he’s had trouble finding the high-grade material he likes, he said that it’s getting easier now, as the market for eco-friendly products has exploded in the four years he’s been using sustainable design materials.

"It’s like the whole trans-fat thing," Thiele said. "People are getting the message that there are benefits to buying this stuff.”

 Erecto Norton, a Los Angeles-based green builder, said that being able to buy Triton wood online will save him a lot of time looking for reclaimed wood products, many of which come from old barns in other regions of the United States.

"Unless you want old railroad ties, it’s hard to find locally," Norton said.

Still a niche market

Wood harvested in an environmentally sensitive way usually costs Norton about 10% more than conventionally harvested wood, but he says he uses energy-efficient technology in his projects, which saves money down the line.

Most consumers, however, may not take this long-term viewpoint. Higher costs have historically made homeowners reluctant to buy eco-friendly building products, said BuildingGreen’s Wilson.

Triton’s products currently cost from 5% to 25% more than certified, lumber, but Goddall feels Triton can eventually be price-competitive.

After all, there are an estimated 300 million to 350 million trees under water worldwide, and Goddall says it’s just a matter of building enough Sawfish — which cost more than $1 million each — and training enough technicians to access them.

“We will be supplying 500 million board feet within five years, putting us in the top 20 producers in Canada,” he said.

So, rather than having a grandmother’s tea service as a conversation piece, homeowners may one day be showing off and discussing the provenance of their floors or support beams.

As long as consumers are making eco-friendly choices, environmentalists are happy.

“People might use it so that they can tell their guests at cocktail parties where it came from,” Wilson said, “and that’s OK.”

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