The rise of the Chinese dragon has a darker side – as much as half of the timber consumed is imported, primarily from tropical nations or nearby Siberia.

According to the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation, forest cover in China, including large areas of timber plantations, increased from 157 million ha in 1990 to 197 million ha in 2005. Counter-intuitively, the expansion of Chinese forests has occurred at the same time the country has been developing an immense export industry for its wood and paper products.

China is now the “wood workshop for the world,” according to Forest Trends, a Washington DC-based think tank, consuming more than 400 million cubic m of timber annually to feed both its burgeoning exports and growing domestic demands. Production of paper products has also grown dramatically in China, doubling from 2002 to 2007.

But the rise of the Chinese dragon has a darker side. As much as half of the timber and much of the paper pulp consumed by China is imported, primarily from tropical nations or nearby Siberia.

In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with this – China has every right to grow economically and seek the kind of prosperity that industrial nations have long enjoyed. However, in its fervour to secure timber, minerals and other natural resources, China is increasingly seen as a predator on the world’s forests.

China is now overwhelmingly the biggest global consumer of tropical timber, importing around 40 to 45 million cubic m of timber annually. Today, more than half of all timber shipped anywhere in the world is destined for China. Many nations in the Asia-Pacific region and Africa export the lion’s share of their timber to China.

China faces three criticisms by those worried about the health and biodiversity of the world’s forests.

First, the country and its hundreds of wood-products corporations and middlemen have been remarkably aggressive in pursuing timber supplies globally, while generally being little concerned with social equity or environmental sustainability. For instance, China has helped fund and promote an array of ambitious new road or rail projects that are opening up remote forested regions in the Amazon, Congo Basin, and Asia-Pacific to exploitation. Such frontier roads can unleash a Pandora’s Box of activities – including illegal colonisation, hunting, mining and land speculation – that are often highly destructive to forests.

Second, China, in its relentless pursuit of timber, almost exclusively seeks raw logs. Raw logs are the least economically beneficial way for developing nations to exploit their timber resources, as they provide only limited royalties and little employment, workforce training, and industrial development. As a result, most of the profits from logging are realised by foreign timber-cutters, shippers and wood-products manufacturers.

A cubic metre of the valuable timber merbau (Intsia bijuga), for instance, yields only around $11 to local communities in Indonesian Papua but around $240 when delivered as a result of the timber, almost exclusively seeks raw logs. Raw logs are the least economically beneficial way for developing nations to exploit their timber resources, as they provide only limited royalties and little employment, workforce training, and industrial development. As a result, most of the profits from logging are realised by foreign timber-cutters, shippers and wood-products manufacturers.

Finally, China has done little to combat the scourge of illegal logging, which is an enormous problem in many developing nations.

A 2011 report on illegal logging by Interpol and the World Bank concluded that among 15 of the major timber-producing countries in the tropics, two-
Sales of eco-certified timber products reaching $7.4 billion in the US alone

From Page 12

thirber of their timber harvested illegally. Globally, economic losses and tax and royalty evasion from illegal logging are thought to cost around $15 billion annually – a large economic burden for developing nations.

A UK report concluded that China imports 16 to 24 million cubic metres of illegal timber each year – an incredible figure and twice the total amount imported annually by leading industrial nations.

Around a third of Chinese timber imports are ultimately exported, as furniture, plywood, flooring, disposable chopsticks, and other wood products. European countries, the US, and Japan are the biggest importers, with consumers there often unaware of the illicit origin of many wood products from China.

When it comes to illegal or predatory logging, it has not been easy to get China’s attention. Stories about illegal logging rarely penetrate the Chinese news media. Outside China, the story is different; awareness of the rapacious nature of Chinese timber interests is growing.

Despite dominating the global timber market, Chinese wood products corporations feel little pressure from buyers to improve the legality of their timber products.

Quarantine fears on forest disease in Tas

A NEW threat to Tasmania’s biosecurity has sparked more questions about the capacity of the state’s downgraded quarantine regime to keep disease out.

While the state government is standing firm in its opposition to the importation of New Zealand apples because of fire-blight concerns, another disease could decimate the forest and nursery industries if it crosses Bass Strait.

Myrtle rust, a fungal disease that can kill native and introduced trees, has been found in Victoria.

The state Opposition says the government needs to reassure the public it can manage the myrtle rust threat on a reduced quarantine budget.

It also wants money used to fund the Fox Taskforce to be redirected into a new biosecurity division.

A lobby group called Friends of Quarantine claims that more than half of the sea containers entering Tasmania are not being checked.

* William Laurance is a distinguished research professor and an Australian Laureate at Queensland’s James Cook University. His research on tropical forest disease in Tasmania has led to the state’s downgraded quarantine regime.

Check the labels when you shop for any wood or paper products. If it says, “Made in China,” be wary of the dragon, and think twice before buying.

Around a third of Chinese timber imports are ultimately exported, as furniture, plywood, flooring, disposable chopsticks, and other wood products