

“Transparency must become the default.”

Fiona Wheatley, Sustainable Development Manager, Marks and Spencer, UK

► Why did M&S commit to zero deforestation?

Our customers expect us to make the right decisions, and to be good custodians of nature and communities. People look to Marks and Spencer (M&S) as a leader, and our vision is to work with others as a catalyst of change.

► How did you put your commitments into practice, and what difficulties did you face?

We acknowledged from the outset that there is only so much anyone can do on their own, so we base our work on partnerships, with NGOs, civil society, governments and our corporate peers. But we face many challenges, and so much is outside our control. Policies and public statement are incredibly important as a framework for action and as a clear call to our peers. Next, is a strong commitment to transparency. Some information is commercially sensitive, but non-disclosure should be the exception and not the rule. Transparency must become the default. M&S forest protection policies and performance are in the public domain. We pin our flag to the mast, and we hope others will do the same.

► What changes would help you?

Companies who are trying to do their best can be commercially disadvantaged, as doing nothing is often more profitable in the short term. This must change. Governments have a valuable role, and whereas certification plugged a governance gap, governments in both producer and consumer countries should focus on creating mechanisms that raise the bar in sustainable production and trade. Certification is highly valuable; however, it is often inaccessible for smallholders and SMEs. There is a need to focus on controlling critical issues alongside creating an accessible entry point that gets producers to improve their practices. Everyone must acknowledge how challenging this can be. Look at oil palm, where 40% of production is from smallholders. Working with so many producers is complex, time consuming and takes a lot of resources, but it brings huge benefits.

► Where do you see such commitments into the future?

There has been an evolution of thinking on how to address deforestation, and currently there is a lot of interest in landscape approaches. M&S's ambitions continue to grow, and after forest protection, we see restoration becoming a higher priority. We have to establish how best to incentivize commitment and progress across all sectors. UK and European retail companies have moved into a new and interesting phase of collaboration. At M&S we know that partnerships help us achieve a scale and breadth of impact. Producing islands of green won't save us; we must leverage change across sectors, across jurisdictions and across the landscape to achieve healthy ecosystems, productive agriculture, sustainable livelihoods and of course, meet our climate goals.