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Barking Up the Right Tree: How Highland Craftsman Is Helping the Local Environment, Economy

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By Tish Tablan, MBDC

Forestry has always been critical to the livelihood of residents in the western North Carolina Mountains, but the economically distressed area has suffered since the furniture industry mostly vacated the region. Thanks to the efforts of Marty and Chris McCurry, co-founders of **Highland Craftsmen**, things are changing. The family-owned company

creates high-quality architectural products out of local Yellow Poplar bark that is reclaimed from the logging industry. By upcycling a widely available waste material, Highland Craftsmen is creating a circular economy that helps local loggers more than double their income without cutting down any additional trees.

The inspiration for the company hit them when they could no longer stand by and watch their quaint, bucolic Appalachian Mountain community become overrun with bland suburban developments devoid of the rich regional character. The pair decided to start a business that would preserve the architectural heritage and natural environment that define the area and minimize the impact of construction. "These are values my grandparents could appreciate for all time," says Chris McCurry.

Marty revived a century-old technique of using natural, untreated American chestnut bark shingles as exterior siding for buildings. Since the chestnut blight decimated most of these trees in the U.S. by the mid-

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twentieth century, this architectural style had largely been forgotten in the region for fifty years. However, when he discovered that these rare shingles could be replaced using bark from the widely available, native Yellow Poplar tree, he knew he had found a way to restore the character of the area. The unique architectural style has caught on, and the bark shingles and wall panels can be found adorning buildings around the country from quaint mountain retreats to the Denver Bronco Mile High Club at INVESCO Field.

All aspects of the company operations were modeled on Cradle to Cradle® principles. Bark inherently provides trees with long-lasting protection against the elements; by using nature as a model for design, the material can provide the same natural barrier for buildings without the use of adhesives, stain, sealants or chemicals. Without the harmful chemical treatments typically found on exterior wood products, Bark House® shingles are biological nutrients that can simply decompose back into the soil as they would in the forest. The Cradle to Cradle-inspired design eliminates the concept of waste by sourcing almost exclusively from the normal waste stream of the forest industry. Furthermore, the company has recently added solar panels that are anticipated to generate more electricity than what is being used during shingle production.

According to Chris, “We have always had a fervent commitment to sustainability. Even when it took hours to explain to clients why we followed the process we chose, as opposed to cutting corners, we pushed forward with our commitments. We chose Cradle to Cradle above all other possible sustainable strategies because it was the most rigorous.” The Bark House® products are in an elite minority that has been Cradle to Cradle Certified™ at the Gold level for meeting stringent requirements in material health, material reutilization, renewable energy use, water stewardship and social responsibility.

In order for Highland Craftsmen to provide a quality, sustainable product, the company had to raise the bar for its suppliers and reshape the practices of the local forestry industry. First, the company had to train loggers how to carefully peel the bark with custom-made hand tools. Then Highland Craftsmen coordinated sustainability trainings for forestry professionals in the region, which was necessary to educate the community about what they were doing and build the base of qualified suppliers. In order to work with Highland Craftsmen, a supplier must have adequate sustainability qualifications in the form of a ProLogger certification or a degree in forestry management. Furthermore, Highland Craftsmen maintains Chain of Custody certifications from Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), The Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) and the Program for Endorsement of Forestry Certification (PEFC) and requires vendors to participate in one of the three sustainable forest management programs. These efforts have helped to green the industry in the region, where five times more Yellow Poplar timber is being grown than harvested. The company has received several awards for its contributions to the community and ethical practices, including being a founding certified B Corporation.

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Highland Craftsmen was able to demand higher sustainability standards throughout the supply chain because it provided economic incentive. By introducing this new architectural product, a market was created for Yellow Poplar bark, which would otherwise be discarded at a cost to mill owners. Depending on the quality of the harvested bark, loggers can make a game-changing 100-200% increase in profit per log. The company has become a lynchpin for the local economy and environment by helping loggers double their income without also doubling the number of trees being cut down.

Furthermore, the company commits to sourcing all raw materials from within 500 miles of their facility in of Spruce Pine, NC, and ninety percent comes from within a 100-mile radius. The company supports 20 full-time employees and works with an average of 200 local suppliers each year. Since the company was founded in 1990, it has supported over 700 vendors in the area. When asked about their significance to the local economy, Chris responded, "I guess you know you have an impact on the community when the fact that you are closed over the July 4th holiday becomes news in town and gets talked about at the local barber shop."

Highland Craftsmen sustains a circular economy model that supports people, planet and prosperity. The company thoughtfully designed a product that revives cultural history, respects the environment and revitalizes the economy.

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McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry advises companies on integrating C2C principles into products, operations, and corporate strategy to regenerate economy, ecology, and equity.

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