

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY: ESG CRITERIA FOR COMPANIES



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"What is essential is invisible to the eye" wrote the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his most famous work, *The Little Prince*.

And in fact, the most important ecosystem we know nothing about lies right under our feet.

Soil is the top layer of the earth's crust, is where 95% of the planet's food is grown and contains more carbon than all plants and the atmosphere combined.

In that dark environment it is estimated that 90% of the fungi, 85% of the plants and more than 50% of the bacteria present on Earth today live.

The very history of life on this Planet is closely linked to the soil and the fungi that live within it: in fact, it is thought that the colonisation of land by plants 400 million years ago was made possible by the fact that there were fungi on the Planet. These were the only organisms that already lived on Earth before plants arrived and created a fertile soil for plants by decomposing rock.

Another, more recent, extraordinary discovery concerning soil is the communication network within it.

It is called a mycorrhiza and is an underground network that connects fungi and plants and which the latter use to exchange nutrients, chemicals and warning signals. When a plant is attacked by an insect that eats its leaves, for example, it develops natural defences, becomes hardened and starts to produce repellent substances. Thanks to mycorrhiza, we know that this plant can warn neighbouring plants, sending them substances that cause them to protect themselves before the insect arrives to eat them.

The most pop name by which mycorrhiza is known is Wood Wide Web and it makes one wonder that we had to wait until we created an infrastructure as complex as the internet to name a natural process that had existed for millions of years.

This basic infrastructure for our society, however, is under threat today.

The latest reports on the global soil status claim that we lose 0.3% of our agricultural production capacity each year due to land consumption. It seems like a small number, but it is not if you look at it over a longer period: in 100 years, that 0.3 becomes 30%. This is, and will increasingly have to be, a major global political issue on par with climate and water access issues.

But what can we do?

To protect the soil we must first of all protect the forests that protect it, especially the older ones.

Indeed, it is essential to preserve the trees that have this close relationship with the organisms around their roots.

We can rely on several solutions to do this.

First and foremost, we can continue to develop the conservation policies that have led us today to be among the top ten countries in the world in terms of the speed of expansion of the forests that now occupy 40% of our territory.

Secondly, we can support the work of bodies such as FSC® that certify the sustainability of a wood product.

Finally, we can apply a concept that the forest has taught us for thousands of years, namely to recycle waste wood and use it as a new raw material, thus avoiding cutting down forests.

Italy is the first country in Europe and among the first in the world for percentage of recycled wood. We are unknowingly a very virtuous country in the recovery of this material, so much so that the techniques used in our country have become case studies all over the world. Saviola Group and Will Media set off on a journey to tell the story of the role of soil, forests and innovation in the social progress of our species. The result is a documentary, which starts from the discovery of the Wood Wide Web to the strategies we have today to reduce deforestation and regenerate our forest heritage.