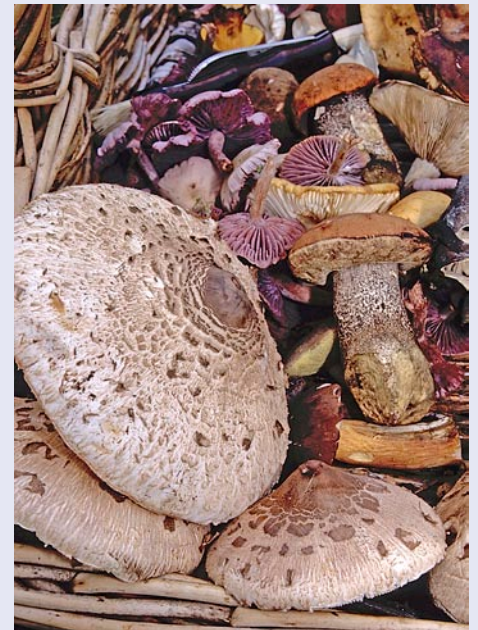


Wild Harvests – Social, cultural and economic values of non-timber forest products

Scottish woodlands have special importance for people who visit them to harvest wild plant material and fungi (collectively referred to as non-timber forest products or NTFPs). This research explored the range of NTFPs that are gathered in Scottish woodlands and identified the types of people who collect them. It documented the value of gathering forest produce in cultural and well-being terms and made recommendations for forest policy and management to encourage and support these activities. The research found that product collection provides a very personal connection to the forests and fulfils important social and cultural needs for those involved. Management of woodlands for NTFPs also promotes biodiversity. Findings of the research have already prompted the development of guidelines for the sustainable harvesting of moss and bulbs. It has also sparked interest in NTFPs amongst a wide range of people, including forestry and rural resource management students.



Background

Forestry practice in Britain, and in Scotland in particular, increasingly considers a broad range of values and objectives for local communities. It is often assumed that people's close relations with and material dependence on woods has declined, but there is growing interest in NTFPs in Scottish woodlands and a strong culture of NTFP collection in some parts of contemporary Scotland. A recent survey showed that 24% of the Scottish population had collected NTFPs in the preceding five years, of which 80% had gathered NTFPs in the past 12 months. Expectations that commercialisation of NTFPs might bring income and employment opportunities to peripheral and rural areas have also triggered renewed interest in this sector.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- assess the range of NTFPs being gathered in Scottish woodlands
- explore the social, cultural, and economic characteristics of collectors, along with their practices and perceptions
- explore the implications and offer an evidence base for future forest policy and management decisions

“Well, I think it is an integral part of our lives, the collecting and being able to go out and walk freely and pick things up that other people don't, maybe don't even see, or see potential in”

Sawmill manager, Berwickshire

Methods

- Study areas represented a range of woodland types and socio-economic groups, also different land ownership, and land management and commercial NTFP practices.
- Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 30 gatherers, mainly from the Scottish Borders and north-western Highlands, with additional interviews by telephone and email. The interviews covered gatherer behaviour, experience and understanding of NTFPs.
- Semi-structured interviews covered day-to-day behaviour, experience and understanding of NTFPs.
- Participants volunteered in response to telephone calls, media announcements and posters. This self-selecting (ie not randomised) group may therefore be unusually enthusiastic and represent small-scale domestic users, rather than large-scale commercial gatherers.

Findings

The wide spectrum of collectors interviewed included farmers, unemployed people, a member of the landed gentry and teachers. They described collecting the wild plant material and fungi as a valuable and joyful part of their lives. Most interviewees were introduced to collecting by parents or grandparents and many have taught their own children. They often combined it with other activities, most often with regular walking. Gatherers described how collecting contributes to their intimate relationship with the countryside and some consider collecting as fundamental to their identity as Scots, members of their family or individuals.

Most of the collectors gathered products for their own or their family's use, with very little commercial activity.

Some minor income generation took place in the informal cash economy (for example through sale of crafts and jams) but the amount harvested or sold was limited by the manual harvest methods. As most NTFPs harvested were fruiting bodies or coppiced materials, the majority of gatherers believed their harvests did not damage species populations. Many gatherers also expressed strong concern about conservation and observed what they considered environmentally appropriate practices.

Over 200 different NTFPs were collected from 173 vascular plant and fungal species. Individuals collected between 6 and 67 different products. 144 products were either eaten or used for beverages, 81 were used for crafts and 18 for medicines.

Recommendations

There is considerable social value in small-scale domestic harvesting of NTFPs and so opportunities for local people should be encouraged and safeguarded.

For woodland managers and landowners

- Where community access to woodland is encouraged, consider the needs of people who gather NTFPs when managing woodlands. Encourage more native trees and diverse understories including hazel and basket willow.
- Cultivate partnerships with collectors, combining their knowledge with scientific information when designing management strategies.
- Exercise caution when scoping expected revenue from NTFP collection and base any fee schemes on a sound understanding of revenue returns to gatherers and administration and enforcement costs of the scheme.

For local or national policy-makers

- Consider policies that affect NTFP collection and marketing in Scotland and any need for adjustments in the legal context, regulations and practices of gathering.
- Develop policies and licensing schemes in consultation with collectors and NTFP interest groups. Generally licensing schemes are not recommended for small-scale domestic harvesting, but may be appropriate for commercial harvesting.

Partners

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Reports and publications

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