

LOCAL USE OF WILD EDIBLE HUCKLEBERRIES

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ABSTRACT

This case study centered in northeast Washington State and northern Idaho focuses on the social ecology of the wild edible huckleberry. Using grounded theory as an overarching method, qualitative data were collected over two harvesting seasons regarding who harvests huckleberries in the study area and why. Four categories of use/users were identified. The results suggest a rich tapestry of social relations surrounding the harvest and use of huckleberries that belies the simplistic notion of "commercial" vs. "recreational" use. These relations include temporal, geographic, economic, and cultural dimensions. Policy implications include the need to move beyond the commercial/recreational dichotomy in regulating the harvest of berries as well as the need to link the notions of community forestry and subsistence to the harvest of nontimber forest products more generally.

Keywords: huckleberry, NTFP, use/user categories, commercial, recreational

INTRODUCTION

After decades of obscurity in the shadow of timber harvest, the harvest and use of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) began to garner additional attention in the technical literature and the popular press in the 1990s. Much of the initial attention focused on the economics of such harvest (Schlosser et al. 1991; Schlosser et al. 1995) as well as the biology/ecology of various NTFPs (Hosford et al. 1997; Molina et al. 1993; Schlosser et al. 1992). Recently the social and community dimensions or social ecology of NTFPs have become more of an area of focus (Anderson et al. 2000; Donoghue 2000; Elmer et al. 2000; Emery 2000; McClain 2000; Richards et al. 1996). One product that is beginning to attract more attention in the Pacific Northwest is wild edible huckleberries (*Vaccinium* spp.) (Richards and Kasworm 2000). Huckleberries are a product that has grown both in popularity and in commercial significance in the region (Blatner and Alexander 1998; Schlosser et al. 1995); yet have thus far resisted attempts at successful commercial cultivation (Barney 2001).

This study focuses on huckleberry harvest in and around the Colville National Forest (CNF) in northeastern Washington State and a small portion of the adjacent Panhandle National Forest in northern Idaho.¹ The study area is one

characterized by relative geographic isolation and a local economy that has suffered with the decline of the timber and mining industries (Findley et al. 2000). Given these circumstances, and the well-known relative abundance of the huckleberry resource in the area, the CNF seemed an ideal location to study the significance of the huckleberry resource from a local, social and cultural standpoint.

Local use of wild edible huckleberries has a long history on and around the Colville National Forest and northern Idaho. A recent social assessment suggested that huckleberries are harvested by a broad array of local people for personal use and for use in a limited number of cottage industry products (Findley et al. 2000). A closer look would suggest that it is part of the social and cultural ecology of the rural communities surrounding the CNF.

In the case of huckleberry harvest on and around the CNF, it appeared at the outset of this research that the use of this resource was locally significant and cut across a variety of social groups in a variety of ways depending on the circumstances of particular individuals and groups. It also appeared that different groups in the area approached huckleberry harvesting differently with some attempting to make part of their household's annual living from berries, while others seemed to focus only on personal use (Findley et al. 2000).

Regulatory Question: Is Berrying a Commercial Activity?

One issue with specific regulatory implications upon which the study set out to shed some light is that concerning the extent to which some portion of the huckleberry harvest in and around the CNF might be labeled a *commercial* activity. Land management agencies tend to label gathering activities such as huckleberry picking as either recreational or commercial. Those engaging in these activities are often required to obtain permits. Forest Service managers interviewed as part of this study stated that they "knew" that some of the picking activities were "commercial" in nature, but admitted, to date, little permit enforcement action had been taken. Our specific interest was to discover how the people carrying out the activity labeled it, and how they viewed labels others might apply.

This labeling question was addressed by McLain (2000) in her study of mushroom harvesting on a national forest in Oregon. She notes that labeling of gathering or other activities (and in particular the labeling of *people* engaging in such endeavors) is a long-established method of state

¹ There are seven identified species of Huckleberry that occur in and around the CNF: *Vaccinium membranaceum/globulare*, *V. myrtilloides*, *V. myrtilillus*, *V. caespitosum*, *V. scoparium*, *V. oxycoccus* and *V. ovalifolium* (Barney 2001, Pattersen et al. 1985). Of these, *V. membranaceum/globulare* (which botanists now classify as a single species) is of the most interest to current-day harvesters because of the relative large size of and abundance of the berries it produces (USDA-FS 2001, Barney 2001). It should be noted, however, that ethnobotanical research indicates that native people in the region traditionally harvested *V. caespitosum*, *V. myrtilillus*, *V. scoparium* as well as *V. membranaceum* (Turner et al. 1980).

control, and adds that harvesters are resistant to the use of such “unidimensional” categories. Muth et al. (1996) dealt with a similar labeling question relating to fur trapping in the northeastern United States, in which the labeling ambiguity involved the distinction among commercial, subsistence and recreational labels.

Drawing together these perspectives from existing NTFP literature, we anticipated that huckleberry harvest and use would be linked to the local way of life in a variety of ways. Further, we anticipated that attempts by the U.S. Forest Service or other agencies to label this use particularly that which was seen as linked to possible additional regulation, would meet with local resistance similar to that described by McLain (2000).

METHODS

The methods employed in this research were qualitative, inductive, and interpretive. Data were collected and analyzed following the precepts of grounded theory (Charmaz 2000; Glaser and Strauss 1967). We chose this interpretive sociological approach in order to capture a rich and encompassing range of worldviews and personal histories concerning linkages to the huckleberry resource.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with huckleberry harvesters and others associated with the huckleberry resource in and around the study area. Initial interviewees were selected on the basis of referrals from U.S. Forest Service managers and knowledgeable “locals.” From these initial sources, categories of harvesters and berry users began to emerge and chain referral leads were identified and followed up. The interviews addressed the topic areas of personal/family/group history of berry harvest and use, the use/disposition of harvested berries, knowledge and views about management of berry plants and their habitat and finally, insights into the patterns and behaviors of others related to berry harvest and use. The interviewing took place over the course of two huckleberry seasons and was not discontinued until new categories and novel information ceased to be forthcoming. In total, 93 interviews were conducted.

Study Area

The study area is in northeastern Washington bordering Idaho to the east and Canada to the north. Specifically this includes Ferry, Pend Oreille, and Stevens counties in Washington. The CNF comprises about 1.2 million acres of these three counties, thereby accounting for almost one-third of the total land base. In Idaho, the study area includes Bonner and Boundary counties. Similarly, the Idaho Panhandle National Forest (IPNF) comprises a large part of these two counties; over 40% of Bonner County is national forest land.

RESULTS

In line with the theoretical approach, we did not enter the field portion of the study with predetermined categories of harvesters to seek out for interview; nor did we frame specific hypotheses. Rather, we allowed the categories of users emerge as we learned more about huckleberries in and around the CNF. The four major categories that emerged were native harvesters, (non-native) household

harvesters, income supplementers, and full timers. These categories are neither entirely mutually exclusive nor absolute. Rather, they reflect general tendencies concerning reasons for and strategies of picking and using/disposing of berries.

Native People

There are a number of tribes and tribal bands whose members historically gathered plant materials on or near land that is currently administered as the Colville National Forest (Dahl 1990). Currently, the Colville Confederated Tribes, the Kalispel, and the Spokane tribes exercise their legal rights of consultation concerning ceded lands that fall within the forest boundaries. Ethnobotanists Turner et al. (1980) and Smith (1950) reported that huckleberries were and remain an important food source for native people in the area. (1999) reports that even today, families from the Spokane tribe continue to prune and maintain their “family plots” of huckleberries.

The interview data from the current study suggest that while the majority of huckleberry gathering by tribal members presently occurs on tribal (reservation) lands, historic use patterns encompassed much of the current national forest acreage in the study area. The interviews also revealed a rich and varied relationship of native people to the huckleberry resource. One native woman stated that huckleberries had spiritual meaning for native people, adding that native people picked the huckleberries with respect and shared them with elders and the infirm.

A knowledgeable non-native informant indicated that there has been a recent resurgence of interest in traditional foods by native people, with more recent generations attempting to go back to traditional foods for symbolic purposes relating to personal and cultural identity. This was echoed by the statement of a native woman who grew up on the Colville Reservation and has picked huckleberries since childhood. She wants her children to pick so they will “...learn what the huckleberry is and will pass it down to their kids.”

Neither the scope of this study nor the expertise of its authors allow for a thorough treatment of native use of the huckleberry resource in the study area. (See Turner et al. 1980 for a more detailed treatment of this complex subject). As we will suggest below, there are some parallels between the relationships of tribal people to the huckleberry resource and those of some non-native household harvesters. However the differences in culture between native and non-native huckleberry harvesters and the historical time scales of the relationships between these respective peoples and the berry resource (centuries vs. decades) led us to conclude that separate categories were appropriate.

Household Harvesters

This category consists of non-native people who pick huckleberries for use in their own households and/or to be shared with friends and relatives. There is considerable variability in terms of knowledge, experience, volumes typically picked in a season and distance traveled from home in search of berries.

Some individuals in this category made it clear that, although the berries are picked to be used in a variety of ways, the recreational experience in the picking was a big

part of the motivation for the activity. They also made it clear that while sometimes sharing or selling extra berries or berry products, particularly in a good year, selling berries for a profit is not what picking is about for them.

Others in this category, however, emphasized the significance of the berries themselves. For them the emphasis (not unlike that of native people) was on the traditions associated with the use of the berries and the sharing of berries within families and networks of close friends. Many talked about knowledge of where and how to pick and prepare berries as being passed down in families and from “home-growns” (locals) to newcomers. Huckleberries and huckleberry products assume a ceremonial or “special occasion” significance, and are served at family reunions, funerals and for special guests.

Income Supplementers

This category consists of people who pick berries for household use but who also harvest for sale as a means of supplementing their income. While many of these individuals are local, some travel as far as 200 miles to harvest. For some, harvesting for sale is a sporadic activity that depends on their immediate financial needs and the quality of the berry year. For others, it is an annual ritual that pays for school supplies or supplements retirement and other income.

The interviews also uncovered evidence that huckleberry picking is an important and necessary portion of annual income for some members of this group. For example, one interviewee indicated that there were 10 or 20 families that she knew of in the community who were out “hustling” berries to make ends meet due to fewer job opportunities in the area. Another interviewee reported that these people tend to be on some form of public assistance and pick huckleberries, in part, to supplement their income in a non-reportable way.

Full Timers

This category includes people for whom picking, processing and/or selling huckleberries is more-or-less a full time occupation during the appropriate season. They sell berries to the local resorts as well as to commercial processors. Some in this category are year-round local residents while others are not. Many in the latter group follow a migratory pattern that might best be described as a seasonal round. Some pick and/or sell other NTFPs such as mushrooms during other times of the year, while others pick fruit (e.g., apples, oranges) as far away as California and Florida. Members of the latter (migratory) group refer to themselves as “fruit tramps.”

The individual who was reputed to be the largest individual volume berry harvester in the area sells his berries mostly to local resorts. He stated: “It’s a way of life for me, a religion.” An out-of-state family returns each year for the huckleberry season. They like picking and selling berries because it is an activity they can do as a family.

For “fruit tramps” harvesting huckleberries is one activity in a season that often includes picking apples, pears, cherries, and oranges. Several interviewees stated that they grew up picking berries and other fruits while traveling with their parents on the seasonal round.

DIFFERENCES AMONG GROUPS OF HARVESTERS

Given the social complexity of huckleberry harvest that we have described, it is not surprising that there are differences and, in some cases, tensions among various groups of harvesters. There are also geographically based differences in the occurrence of the categories of harvesters noted above. On the west side of the Colville Forest, we found native and household harvesters and a handful of income supplementers. The only remotely commercial activities consisted of individuals selling a few gallons of berries to neighbors, local restaurants, or in makeshift stands. Local businesses that sold processed huckleberry products reported that they obtained their products from out-of-state. On the east side of the forest, however, in addition to the first three categories, there was a greater preponderance of full timers who sold their products both to local businesses as well as out-of-area companies.

We also asked interviewees to describe the vegetative conditions where they looked for berries and to describe their method of picking and handling berries. Natives, household harvesters and some income supplementers favored conditions with semi-closed forest canopies and tended to pick and clean berries with their hands only. Those more on the commercial end of the spectrum tended to favor large open meadows, old burns or clearcuts that had grown up to brush. The latter group also tended to use “rakes” rather than bare hands for picking, particularly in Idaho, as they are illegal on the CNE. This is undoubtedly related at least, in part, to the need for greater efficiency on the part of those selling berries. Because such rakes tend to pick up more leaves and twigs, the job of “cleaning” the berries is larger than is the case in hand picking. Thus, these harvesters generally cleaned their berries on portable ramp and screen devices.

The interviews also uncovered tensions between local and nonlocal harvesters, harvesters of different racial/ethnic origins (e.g., Hmong, Laotian, Thai and Vietnamese) as well as between commercial and noncommercial pickers. For example, one household harvester said that he doesn’t like how commercial pickers operate: “They rape bushes and clear a whole hillside.”

Another, a local commercial harvester, described a fairly chaotic situation in some picking areas with as many as 400 pickers at once at a location favored by commercial harvesters. He stated that while he harbors no racial or ethnic prejudice, he is concerned about the picking methods of some of the Asian crew pickers, which he feels are damaging to the bushes. He said that he goes through a berry patch taking only the mature berries while the crews tend to take everything in a fell swoop.

Another Anglo commercial harvester had a different view of Asian harvesters. She said that the rumors that Asian harvesters picked or cut the branches off the bushes was not true: “They’re hard working, very careful and pick by hand; they do a beautiful job.”

An Asian man who traveled to the area from Spokane to harvest huckleberries stated he has not had any conflicts with other pickers, though he reported hearing about a couple conflicts involving Asians and whites. He also said that in the last couple of years, someone told him that

some white people had stolen berries from the vehicle of Asians.

The interviews for the current study also revealed that as was the case with McClain's (2000) mushroom harvesters, the label "commercial" as it applies to huckleberry harvest is contested. The tension over the label was clearly linked to the idea that commercial activities are subject to regulation and fee permits, while noncommercial activities only require a free-use permit. For example one couple who reported picking a few gallons for themselves and a few to sell to neighbors resisted the label "commercial": They said that they didn't consider themselves commercial pickers. When asked about commercial pickers, they said that a commercial picker is like the guy in Spokane who wants to buy 500 gallons, as is a person who picks all summer and sells to someone else.

Views concerning application of the term "commercial" and the notion of whose harvest should be regulated and whose should not were also wrapped up in the insider/outsider distinction as well as the size and scope of a particular enterprise. For example there was fairly universal agreement that local household pickers and even out-of-area household pickers (say from Spokane) should not be subject to regulation. On the other hand, larger operations that send workers to the local area to pick were sometimes cited as examples of who should be regulated. The "gray area" in some interviewees' minds was related to the locally-owned businesses that bought berries from local or migrant harvesters.

Despite some concerns about the practices of some commercial harvesters, on the east side of the study area there was generally strong sentiment among those interviewed against regulating huckleberry harvest. This sentiment is captured in the following quote from a picker who doesn't like the idea of any additional regulation: "I don't want a huckleberry patrol."

CULTURAL/SOCIAL/ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF HUCKLEBERRY HARVEST

The study revealed strikingly diverse relationships between people who live in or frequent the study area and the huckleberry resource. Members of the four categories of harvesters identified had an array of different linkages to the huckleberry resource and to each other ranging from a very casual harvest to huckleberries as an important part of one's cultural heritage.

We also discovered that asking people about their interest in huckleberries tended to generate discussion linked to much larger questions of human relationships to nature and to the forest. Interestingly, connections to berries cut across many of the differing local value perspectives on forest management identified in the previous social assessment (Findley et al. 2000). Local environmentalists and local wise-use advocates could be found nearly side-by-side in the berry patches.

Despite all the variability in connections to the huckleberry resource, there were also some striking commonalities. Virtually everyone we talked to in the study area about the subject "knew" about huckleberries. They could give a

fair estimate of when the berries "came on" that year, what kind of a "berry year" it was, the going price for berries and who was selling or buying. One striking aspect of this "common knowledge" is that given native peoples' connection to the resource and the more or less continuous human habitation of at least portions of the area, one can make a case that human knowledge of berries in the local area extends back in time certainly hundreds and possibly as far as several thousand years (Turner et al. 1980).

Another implication we would draw both from this case and our reading of other work on NTFPs is that the dichotomy often used in trying to classify gathering activities as either "commercial" or "recreational" greatly oversimplifies the significance of these activities to those who participate. For example, we agree with Anderson et al. (2000) who, in their study of fern gathering by Korean and Japanese people on the San Bernardino National Forest, argue that the label of "commercial harvest" does not fit this culturally significant activity. However, we are not so sure the "recreation" label they apply instead is a very good fit either. It is our contention that much (although certainly not all) of the activity related to NTFPs falls into the gray area of "somewhere between," meaning neither strictly commercial nor strictly recreational. In this area, the harvest and use of huckleberries is rooted in the local way of life and (largely informal) economy in a variety of ways not adequately captured by the recreation/commercial dichotomy.

A third classification of gathering activities often discussed in the literature is that of "subsistence." Subsistence is generally seen as harvesting or gathering activities conducted by people to provide the basic material needs of a household or extended family. The term is also generally linked to the idea that such activities have been carried on long enough in families and communities to have acquired cultural significance. While huckleberries hardly constitute a significant portion of the annual caloric budget for native or non-native families, the cultural significance of the berries is similar to that described in the subsistence literature. However, a further complication introduced by attempting to apply the term subsistence to berry use in this case would be that, in the U.S. regulatory context at least, the term is often associated with the particular legal standing of certain rural Alaska residents to hunt, fish, and gather particular resources for household use (Johnson 2000).

Were it not for the specific legal implications often associated with the term, subsistence might come closest to describing the reasons that a portion of people who do not profit financially from berries pick them. Clearly, the subsistence label in both its material and cultural dimensions would fit the circumstances of most if not all Native American berry harvesters as well as those non-natives who harvest berries in relatively large quantities for household use.

For many, the opportunity to be outside enjoying scenery and nature is a primary motivator for berry harvest, thus the recreation label would be apt. However, for others (and not just native people), the berries, their harvest, and their uses are more significant than simple "fun," nutritional value or flavor would suggest. Perhaps the label "culturally or historically significant" is the most descriptive for such activities. Our point, however, is not to create a new label, but rather to point to the limitations of the la-

bels frequently used. Our data suggest that in the case of huckleberries, there is a spectrum of reasons for picking and using huckleberries, some of which do not neatly fit the categories often applied by land managers.

REGULATORY IMPLICATIONS

We believe the results of this research also suggest some regulatory implications and conundrums, particularly for the national forest system. Differences in views over the labeling and regulation of huckleberry harvest on the CNF can be viewed as a microcosm of the historic tension over the “real purpose” of the national forests. One view holds that the primary focus of national forest management should be the national interest, broadly conceived and that local populations should have no particular special status concerning the management or use of such lands or of the products or services derived from them. The other view holds that geographically proximate populations do have a special interest in “their” local national forest and that local concerns and uses should be given special consideration.

This on-going tension plays out in many places, among them the regulation of NTFPs such as huckleberries. We suggest that differences expressed over the labeling of various types of huckleberry use are reflective of this larger tension over the “real purpose” of the national forests and the competing claims that various stakeholders at various levels make vis-à-vis the forests.

At a more practical level, strict regulation of huckleberry harvest would pose a challenge for federal land managers. The sarcastic comment of one interviewee about “huckleberry patrols” reflects this dilemma. Determining the intended end use of a particular harvester’s batch of berries and/or determining the total volume of an individual’s seasonal harvest are uncertain and time-consuming processes at best.

CONCLUSIONS

If there is one striking impression emerging from this study, it is the extent of social complexity surrounding harvest and use of huckleberries in the study area. This complexity has a temporal/historical dimension (hundreds, perhaps thousands of years of use by native people), a geographic dimension (“home-grown,” fruit tramps, urban residents), economic dimensions and certainly a variety of cultural dimensions. Connection to and indeed, passion for the berries both connects and separates different groups of people in any number of ways. As complex as the (biological) ecology of the huckleberry and its habitat are, the social ecology is at least on a par, if not more complicated. It is our hope that what we have tried to briefly describe here will encourage others in the field to look more deeply into the social complexity associated with this and a variety of other nontimber forest products. In the meantime we hope that the policy/regulatory debates over NTFPs will move beyond the simple recreation-commercial dichotomy and also recognize the linkage of NTFP harvest regulation to larger questions of land tenure and what constitutes the “national interest” in public land management.

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