

A World Beneath the Trees – Non-Timber Forest Resources

By Jim Chamberlain, Coordinator of IUFRO Research Group 5.11.00 Non-wood Forest Products

Forest dependent communities around the world are seeking alternatives to conventional sources of income, employment and investment. Communities that have depended on forests for timber, fishing, mining or traditional agriculture need other economic options while maintaining forest health. Non-timber forest products, or NTFPs, which are plants, parts of plants, fungi, and other biological material that are harvested from within and on the edges of natural, manipulated or disturbed forests, may provide viable options for forest-based communities.

Recognizing the importance and value of these forest resources, the Centre for Non-Timber Resources of Royal Roads University, Victoria, Canada, with IUFRO and other prominent institutions, organized an international symposium, and a trade show to explore issues and raise awareness. The two meetings attracted more than 275 delegates from 21 countries. From Russia to Cameroon to Brazil and Alaska, researchers and practitioners came together to wrestle with questions of how to reconcile community economic stability and development, conservation of forest values. The organizers wanted the symposium to be more than a sharing of perspectives on these issues and they succeeded at creating a forum that addressed major issues of concern. Some highlights include:

Production and Harvesting – Lessons from ‘southern’ countries can provide valuable insight into the sustainable management of forests in ‘northern’ neighbors. Tenure rights to NTFPs vary from open access to strict control, and they are essential for sustainable management of the resources. Silvicultural practices with various thinning and fertilization regimes have potential to create diverse habitats that will allow NTFPs to flourish. Diverse constraints, such as lack of labor, germination rates, and need to protect against pests, affect the adoption of NTFP management practices.

Processing, Marketing and Trade – A sustainability study revealed that the major share of the profit margin for NTFPs, in Nepal, did not go to marginalized groups, but to wholesale traders. Appropriate interventions require understanding the entire market chain, and how NTFP management activities fit livelihood strategies of market players along the value chain. The long-term economic success of wood-carving industry is threatened by declining



Photo by Jim Chamberlain, USDA Forest Service*

and over-harvesting of forest resources that are often used for timber production.

Backward and Forward Linkages – The question of how linkages, through the market chain, influence the contribution of NTFPs to livelihoods and forest conservation is critical to developing sustainable strategies. Involving women and government and non-government organizations would enhance the potential for sustainable management of community NTFP forests in Cameroon. Lessons from case studies in Asia suggest key principles, of sustainable NTFP management, include consideration of the entire management system, promotion of community participation and integration of science and local knowledge.

Production to Consumption Linkages across Scales – Partnerships can strengthen global actions to integrate NTFPs into forest management. The Brazilian bromeliad trade provides examples of social, economic, and ecological barriers that must be overcome for local production to compete in a global market. For national and international chains, intermediaries, in Mexico and Brazil, play a pivotal role in making markets more accessible. It is theorized that certification of NTFPs, providing a standardized labeling system, could improve consumer comprehension and lead to increased market demand.

*Photo caption: Long-term monitoring plots for black cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*), an important medicinal forest product, using volunteer citizen scientists, are essential for determining sustainable harvest regimes.

Report on the IUFRO co-sponsored International Symposium "A Future Beneath the Trees" and subsequent meeting with North American Forest Commission, Victoria, Canada, 25-27 August 2005.