

Variegated non-timber forest product resource deserves creative management

Bruce Fraser, Past Chair, Forest Practices Board

Bringing non-timber forest products (NTFPs) into the mainstream forest management and the provincial economy is a challenge of major proportions. Many of the factors that affect harvesting, marketing, and maintenance of NTFP crops—a subset of non-timber forest resources—are hidden in unrecorded traditional uses by First Nations, in the informal and underground economy of subsistence harvesters, in recreational pursuits, and in scientific obscurity. What evidence we have for the value to society of NTFPs is often so lightly documented that it is difficult to make a case for attention amid the clamour arising from traditional resource industries. Making room in our forest management for poorly documented resources that exhibit cultural, economic, ecological, and management complexity demands a high level of effort. Complexity is not, however, a reason to ignore the great potential of treating our forest land as a richly variegated resource that will benefit from an equally variegated approach to management.

Mushrooms, medicines, fruits, and florals come immediately to mind as the main focus of the NTFP industry in British Columbia. These crops can provide for economic diversification in rural communities, can provide a sustaining or supplementary income for individuals and families, and can be culturally essential to First Nations, as well as providing important health and recreational benefits to rural and urban residents alike. Beyond these obvious resources lies an even greater value in the ecological services inherent in the forest: purification and supply of clean air and water, sequestration of atmospheric carbon, and productivity of soil. While initially looking at material products with a definable market and cash value, management of non-timber forest resources invites us to consider the dynamics of the whole forest. The management task on which we now focus most of our energy—the production of market timber—must evolve to treat the forest as it really is, both a diverse source of economically useful values and an essential part of the planet's life-support system.

The case histories referenced in the series of articles co-ordinated by the Centre for Non-timber Resources (recently renamed the Centre for Livelihoods and Ecology) begin to illuminate the products, users, markets, and methods that support the emerging NTFP industry in British Columbia. They also begin to suggest how it is both possible and profitable to modify traditional approaches to timber management in order to foster ecologically sound development of this new economic sector. Collier and Hobby's article (see pages 1–8) provides a view of managing these resources from a First Nations perspective, whereas Mitchell and Hobby's synthesis article (see pages 27–38) provides both local and global context for the emergence of different approaches. Collaborative design is the key to managing forest resources for the many diverse and often under-represented interests in the non-timber resource sector, and will go a long way to addressing the current limitations of our information.

We have before us an opportunity to follow the emerging insights about non-timber resources with practical demonstrations of co-design and co-management. The current circumstances of our forest industry, the resulting need for economic diversification, and the global need to maintain the natural functions of the forest demand that we rise to the challenge.