

Non-Timber Forest Products in Central Appalachia: Market Opportunities for Rural Development¹

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The gathering of forest products has supplemented the incomes of Central Appalachia residents for many generations. Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) can be grouped within four general categories: edibles such as mushrooms; medicinal and dietary supplements, including ginseng, ginkgo, and St. John's wort; floral products such as moss, grape vines, and ferns; and specialty wood products including carvings, utensils and containers. Increased NTFP harvest may have serious long-term effects on the forest ecosystem and efforts to sustainably manage the region's forests. Less is known about managing forests for NTFPs than for timber-based products, even though they contribute significantly to local and regional economies.

The region's NTFP industry is growing rapidly, perhaps faster than the timber industry. Some estimate that NTFP markets have grown nearly 20 percent in the last few years. The size of Virginia's NTFP industry has been estimated at \$35 million. In 1991, Virginia collected and exported nearly 6.5

tons of ginseng worth more than \$1.8 million. Despite the value of these products, little is known about the extent of harvesting or the long-term effects of this extraction. The Appalachian forests have vast diversity, much less is known about the multitude of other NTFPs found in our forests. Information is needed that draws attention to critical issues related to non-timber forest products.

Through interviews, and structured and unstructured meetings with local communities, the project team has gathered data needed to better understand this burgeoning forest use and essential for developing policies to sustain forest resources. Local management practices, the value and volume of products traded, and the scope of NTFP markets have been documented. Those who gather, market, and manage NTFP resources were involved at all stages of the research. This work will show that NTFPs offer opportunities both for increased income in rural areas, and the sustainable management of forest resources.

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