

# Opportunities and Limitations for the Certification of Non-Timber Forest Products From Well-Managed Forests<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Non-timber forest product (NTFP) certification presents unique and complex challenges, especially with regard to documenting the biology and ecology of harvested species, evaluating the social and environmental impacts of harvest, and tracking products from forest to consumer. While certification may improve NTFP management and increase market access, there is also a danger that certification may negatively impact traditional use and sale of NTFPs. Case studies that will test the issues discussed in this paper will help the Forest Stewardship Council, an accreditor of forest management certifiers, better determine how to address creation of NTFP certification guidelines.

## Introduction

Today's consumer is a sophisticated shopper whose purchasing behavior is no longer driven solely by quality and price alone, but also by concerns about the social and environmental impacts of their purchases. A 1993 EPA report found that a majority of Americans classify themselves as environmentalists, consider the environmental attributes of a product or company when making a purchasing decision, and show a preference for green products when cost and quality are comparable to competing goods (EPA 1993). In response to the rise of green consumerism, companies have increasingly begun to use labels and claims on products in an effort to woo environmentally-conscious consumers and differentiate their products in the marketplace. But are environmentally concerned consumers always being furnished with credible information? Apparently not. For example, a study in the United Kingdom found over 600 different eco-labels and claims carried on tropical wood products, only 3 of which were able to be substantiated whatsoever (Read 1991).

## Labeling

The supermarket is perhaps the best place to begin analyzing labels, because so many people are concerned about the quality of food they ingest. A seemingly simple milk label actually bears a dizzying array of information about its price, nutritional content, state or community of origin, its producer's membership in a dairy association and whether the cows used to produce the milk were injected with bovine growth hormone. A primary way to

distinguish between labels on products is to determine if they are first-party, second-party or third-party claims. A first-party claim is made by the producing company, asserting the producer's own judgements about the product. Examples of first-party claims are "new and improved", "no animal testing involved" or "we plant two trees for every one harvested". With such labels, it is up to the consumer to take the producer's words as truth (the FTC legal issue of accurate claims aside). A second-party label carries the claim of a trade association, which, through membership fees, retains a vested economic tie to the producer. Examples include beef, dairy or citrus growers' trade associations and their associated ad campaigns. A third-party label involves an outside audit of a producer's operation against independently developed standards (Ervin et al. 1996). Third party labels can be mandatory for producers, such as USDA inspection labels, or they can be voluntary. Examples of voluntary third-party evaluations include kosher, organic and fair trade labeling systems. Forest product certification surveys indicate that consumers are more likely to trust information provided by environmental groups or third-party labels, often referred to as independent certification, than they are of information given by first-party, second-party or government labels (Vlosky 1998, Ozanne and Vlosky 1998).

## *NTFP Labeling*

As in many other business sectors, claims about the environmental and social aspects of non-timber forest product (NTFP) production are proliferating. Many claims are first party, such as "environmentally sound", "respectfully wildcrafted" or "hand gathered". Labeling of NTFPs is further complicated by the oft-held but mistaken belief that all NTFPs are inherently

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“green” because their harvest does not generally involve logging, thereby leaving forests protected intact (Viana, Pierce, & Donovan 1996).

Unfortunately, NTFP resources can be just as poorly managed and over-exploited as any other natural resource. Still, producers and conservation groups often build upon the reputation of NTFPs as environmentally sensitive products that contribute needed income to forest dependent communities, and label NTFPs accordingly. Such labels span the gamut from outright truth, to well-intentioned claims in need of further substantiation, to misinformation. While first-party claims from local, trustworthy cooperatives of NTFP producers, reputable conservation groups or responsible companies may give consumers all the assurance they require, third-party certification may increase the credibility of claims made and assist in the overall structure and implementation of NTFP management systems.

### **The Forest Stewardship Council**

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is an independent, non-profit accreditor of forest management certifiers. FSC itself does not certify operations on the ground. Rather, its diverse membership of environmentalists, timber producers and retailers, academics, indigenous peoples and forest workers from over 40 countries creates and approves principles and criteria for forest management. FSC’s secretariat then assesses certifying organizations to ensure adherence to FSC principles and policies, technical competency and quality of work. FSC’s principles and criteria address issues such as forest management planning and monitoring, protection of biodiversity, protection of soil and water quality, maintenance of forest function and structure, rights of forest workers and indigenous peoples, land tenure issues and other socio-economic aspects of forest management (FSC 1996).

To date, the FSC has focused its attention on timber certification, approving the management of more than 25 million acres of forestland worldwide. FSC-approved certifiers evaluate the entire management system of a forest with a multi-disciplinary team. Those operations that demonstrate exemplary management by balancing economic, social and ecological aspects of forest management are granted certification and the right to use the FSC logo. The FSC logo assures consumers that the forest products they purchase come from responsibly managed forests, thereby connecting the consumer through his or her purchase directly to forestry practices on the ground in

a particular forest. Although certified forests are managed holistically, it was only this year that FSC’s board approved usage of the FSC logo on NTFPs on a case by case basis. So far, no NTFPs currently carry the FSC logo, and there are many complex issues surrounding NTFP certification that the FSC and its approved certifiers are currently researching and evaluating.

### **NTFP Certification Issues**

From a forestry perspective, NTFP certification presents a number of challenges when viewed within the context of an overall forest management plan. FSC-approved certifiers may wish to consider the following issues when evaluating NTFP management and harvest: 1) the intensity of NTFP management and its effects on overall forest biodiversity; 2) the advantages and disadvantages of natural forest systems versus plantation systems; 3) the availability, or lack thereof, of scientific data as a basis for NTFP management decisions; 4) the determination of appropriate harvest levels based upon population dynamics; 5) equity issues surrounding the distribution of income derived from NTFPs and degree of local reinvestments of income or technical assistance; 6) tracking mechanisms to trace NTFPs from forest to consumer; 7) subsistence issues, particularly the impact of forest management upon people who heavily depend on NTFPs for income, food or shelter; 8) the cultural and spiritual values of NTFPs to local people; and 9) the impact of timber harvesting on NTFP resources and vice versa (Viana, Pierce, and Donovan 1996).

Some NTFP species will be easier to certify than others. For the sake of illustration, it may be helpful to discuss the certification issues presented by two very different products. We know, for instance, a good deal about maple sap production. Minimum diameters for tapping of maple trees have been determined based upon decades of experience and research (Willits and Hills 1965, Beattie, Thompson, and Levine 1993). Specifics of sugar maple reproduction and silviculture are also well known. Evidence of maple tapping is readily apparent, making tenure and access issues easier to determine and monitor than wild herbs, which may be pilfered from a certified forest in a day’s time by a silent collector. Tracing sap to collection tanks and sugar houses to insure it is not mixed with sap from uncertified sources is also relatively routine, as is keeping track of certified tins of syrup when sold at the farm gate or the local store. The larger and more provocative questions

relating to certification of maple sap relate to the management and placement of the sugarbush within the forest management unit and the surrounding landscape. What are the impacts of sugarbush management on soils? How is the understory vegetation managed? What are the economic and ecological tradeoffs to be weighed? For example, sugarbushes are known to conflict with wildlife habitat goals (Beattie, Thompson, and Levine 1993). Certification teams must weigh and judge localized impacts on wildlife against the availability of suitable wildlife habitat across the entire certified forest and, perhaps, its surrounding parcels. The removal of mast-producing species may cause a sugarbush to receive negative wildlife scores, but this factor could be counter-balanced by the habitat and conservation values that older growth maple stands provide for pileated woodpeckers, insects, fungi and understory herbs.

By contrast, certification of wild mushrooms from public lands in the Pacific Northwest poses more difficult dilemmas for evaluation teams. First, the biology and ecology of many commercially gathered species is still poorly understood (Molina et al. 1993, Pilz and Molina 1994). Second, mushrooms fruit irregularly in time, space and abundance, making specific incorporation of mushroom harvest provisions into long-term forest management planning difficult. Determination of appropriate harvest levels for various mushroom species remains a subject of debate. Mushrooms gathered from national forest lands also present unique challenges with respect to tenure, access, monitoring and designation of areas for certification. A rogue harvester could easily make incursions into a certified area, disrupting population levels, management planning and monitoring activities. To further complicate matters, the social issues surrounding mushroom harvesting are as complex as the ecological issues. Harvesters may be Anglos, Latinos, Native Americans or Southeast Asians. Different harvester groups utilize the mushroom resource for different purposes (e.g., commerce, subsistence, recreation) and hold different values about the resource (Richards and Creasy 1996). How would certification balance the views and access rights of the various players? Lastly, tracking mushrooms from certified forests to market to insure they are not mixed with uncertified mushrooms presents administrative headaches. Like fiddlehead ferns, mushrooms are collected by diverse numbers of individuals, are often bought at roadside stands and may pass through several hands before final processing and packaging. While I do not

categorically exclude wild mushrooms from ever being certified, it is clear that the issues surrounding mushroom growth, harvest and sale are more complex and less understood than with maple syrup. Rendering judgements about responsible mushroom management will prove challenging.

Perhaps the greatest issues of concern about NTFP certification revolve around cost and accessibility. In many parts of the world, NTFPs are of primary importance to the rural poor and those living at the margins of the global, capitalist economy (FAO 1995, De Beer and McDermott 1996, Broekhoven 1996). Worldwide, harvesters are often unorganized, lack strong political influence and command little economic clout. Even in affluent countries, the profit margins of many NTFP harvesters and producers are generally small. The added financial and infrastructural costs of a certification evaluation may not make economic sense to small-scale NTFP producers if market access or green premiums cannot be guaranteed. Harvesters may additionally resist participating in the development of NTFP harvest guidelines and evaluations if they perceive that certification will either become an overly burdensome regulatory tool or a hindrance that ultimately curtails either their traditional access to NTFP resources or their traditional markets for NTFPs. Already, there are cases where organic certification of coffee has allowed organized cooperatives access to green markets and higher prices while small, poor farms that are default organic producers, but who lack funds to become certified, are denied similar market advantages (Rice and Ward 1996). The ultimate goal of certification should be to facilitate better management of NTFPs and reward exemplary producers with reputable marketing claims, not to serve as an impediment to technical assistance and market access.

### **Pros and Cons of NTFP Certification**

NTFP certification offers potential benefits and potential disadvantages. Chief among the potential disadvantages are: 1) the creation of a real or perceived impediment to access of NTFP resources and markets by rural poor; 2) the disruption of traditional social and economic structures in subsistence communities; 3) the failure to address the myriad number of locally important NTFPs by concentrating only on high-value, internationally traded NTFPs; 4) the prohibitively high cost of certification to small producers; 5) the risks entailed by additional investments of time and money in a new and evolving concept; and 6) the arduous task of

tracking certain NTFPs from forest to market.

On the other hand, certification presents potential benefits for NTFP producers, including: 1) the creation of a management plan and a framework for evaluating NTFPs within the entire forest system; 2) the ability to reach agreement from key stakeholders on the standards to be used as the basis of NTFP evaluations; 3) the market differentiation, access to green markets and potential price premiums provided by certification; 4) the increase in the morale of the operation's workers; 5) the ability of the operation to complement existing laws and treaties (e.g., CITES, Biodiversity Convention, national forestry laws); 6) the increased quality control over all aspects of production; and 7) potential leverage to obtain funding, continuing technical assistance, higher visibility and publicity (Pierce 1996).

### **Development of Standards and Field Testing through Case Studies**

The scale and intensity of NTFP management varies, ranging from intensive agro-forestry production areas to foraged wild populations of plants that are extensively managed or completely unmanaged. NTFP harvest differs in its effect upon target populations according to the product used. Extraction of gums, resins, leaves and fruits, for example, generally leave NTFP resources intact to reproduce in the future; digging of roots and the use of entire plants such as rattan and some palms results in the extirpation of individual organisms. Currently, the Forest Stewardship Council and other organizations and initiatives are struggling with how to create standards that address the myriad social, economic and ecological idiosyncrasies of non-timber forest products. Can standards be generic, must they be developed by class (e.g., exudates, rhizomes, barks, reproductive propagules, etc.), or should standards be set for each individual species? For the purposes of worldwide principles, perhaps it is enough to reference general guiding themes, such as the need for population analyses to determine NTFP harvest levels, the importance of recognizing subsistence and local usage of NTFPs, and the need for tailoring harvest and management guidelines to the particular plant part harvested. Perhaps in the future, class guidelines may suffice, but I suspect that species-specific standards will need to be developed for preliminary field trials. The creation of standards is an art that requires balancing the prescriptive with the descriptive. The ecological amplitude of some species is quite wide, and the growth, reproduction and sensitivity to harvest

manifested by a species may vary tremendously from forest to forest, especially when moisture and elevation are considered. NTFP standards will therefore require flexibility, particularly because they will need to be viewed within the context of a complete forest management plan.

Several NTFP case studies from around the globe will help inform the future direction of NTFP certification. In Bolivia, an FSC-affiliated working group has created draft standards for the certification of Brazil nuts. The Rainforest Alliance's SmartWood Program is currently developing class guidelines for NTFP harvest and will be field testing certification guidelines for specific NTFP species in Latin America. The Mediterranean Program Office of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is encouraging NTFP initiatives in a number of critical forest ecosystems around the Mediterranean Sea. Other movements, such as EcoFair, FairTrade, the organic movement and the Analog Forest Network are also looking at creating more holistic guidelines for labeling of non-timber forest products. Research institutions and organizations such as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the Tropenbos Institute and the Center for International Forestry Research are also carrying out valuable ongoing research projects that will add greatly to our general understanding of what constitutes responsible NTFP management.

### **Conclusion**

Different labels will appeal to differing segments of the non-timber forest products industry and the public. First party labeling may be quite successful for many NTFP operations. However, if a producer is interested in third party certification, they should carefully consider two factors. First, who is the ultimate consumer they are attempting to attract, and which label will most effectively target their ideal consumer profile? Second, what benefits will the particular certification process bring to their management system? By itself, certification is not a quick or even appropriate single solution to the complexities posed by NTFP management, harvest and sale. Rather, certification should be viewed as one tool among many tools capable of being used to improve NTFP management. Other effective tools include harvester training, organization and education, continuing basic biological and ecological research, regulation, rural economic development programs and continuing transfer of legal, educational and technical assistance to local communities. NTFP labeling and certification initiatives will continue to evolve. Regardless of

certification's ultimate efficacy in improving NTFP management, I see two positive benefits emerging from the NTFP certification dialogue. The first benefit is the promotion of NTFPs as a serious topic to be reckoned with inside the forestry sector, both within and outside the realm of certification. The second benefit of NTFP certification discussions will be their ultimate contribution to understanding of critical research questions, such as: What constitutes responsible NTFP management and harvest? How can NTFPs be better reflected in overall forest management plans? How should the values and attitudes of various stakeholders be evaluated and weighed? What are the ultimate market realities for NTFPs? Environmental certification is a new and evolving field that offers promise. I hope many of you here today will contribute to ongoing non-timber research by participating in the creation of guidelines for NTFP management, regardless of whether those guidelines are ever used for certification and marketing.

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