



A StarTree retreat in Germany

Three years into a four-year project, Emma Chapman reports on what has been learned so far from the StarTree Project.

It was November 2015, and we should have been in Turkey. That had been the plan for many months, it was our only chance to meet there, it was our best chance to learn from our Turkish colleagues. But caution and world events dictated otherwise. StarTree partners in Germany scrambled to implement a Plan B, and we met in a quiet retreat centre north-west of Hamburg. As usual, around 40 of us travelled from our various corners of Europe to spend time together. This time, instead of venturing out to see our host region's forest products, we spent a day telling each other about what we have learned in our own regions.

It was a good time to do it. StarTree is a four-year project, and this meeting marked the end of year three. When we meet in Wales in May 2016, all the data will have

been gathered, and much of it will have been analysed. From then until the project's end in October 2016, we will be disseminating StarTree's findings, via articles, papers, talks, workshops, meetings, websites and any other practicable means. So this quiet meeting in November was an opportune moment for StarTree's 24 partner organisations to turn towards each other and ask, "what have we learned?"

NWFPs and silviculture

The Natural Resources Institute Finland (LUKE) has been looking at berry yields; its work generates very mathematical models, which now need to be translated so as to communicate well to forest owners. Another interest is the business potential of non-wood forest products (NWFPs) that belong to the landowner, rather than being available to everyone under traditional 'everyman's rights'. Sap, resin, lichens – anything that is actually attached to the tree.

Emin Baskent, from Bursa in Turkey, gave a talk which demonstrated eloquently just what we were missing. 99.9 per cent of their forest is state owned, with a high level of central control, which means that multiple-use forest management planning can be a reality there. Decisions are made based on ecological, economic, and social values. A decision support system is an essential tool. For example, they can prioritise Net Present Value of mushrooms over timber, or of timber over mushrooms. Developing an inventory method is hard because different NWFPs have different characteristics; each product, or at least each category of products, requires different inventory techniques. The body of work on display was tremendous.

From Latvia, by contrast, a very hands-on study on birch sap. For 30 days during April and May, researchers measured sap, temperature, precipitation, and ground temperature. There was

Above: StarTree delegates gathered in the garden of our peaceful rural meeting venue, the Seminarhaus Pegasus. Photo by Minna Korhonen.

equipment to carry, as well as sap from 150 trees spread over three sites. Accidents happened, stuff was stolen! At the end, a simple result: the two factors influencing the flow of the sap were temperature and tree diameter. Insights also came from the sheer practical difficulties: sap is a lot heavier than mushrooms! So it is likely that most birch sap will be collected from easily-accessible plantations on agricultural land, and that forest sap will remain a very narrow niche product.

Discussion followed, on how silviculture affects NWFP production. Senior researcher Margarida Tomé warned against claiming to “optimise” conditions for NWFPs, because we do not yet know what is optimal. We should talk instead only of “support” for NWFP production. Others asked, is there a trade-off or a synergy between NWFPs and timber production? Even in Finland, with their vast supplies of berries and mushrooms, the economic value of NWFPs is small compared with timber. But forest management decisions are often made for other values than money. In Wales, small forest owners are looking to maximise social and ecological value, but they want some economic yield to support their forest management or other aims. They have their own ideas, maybe one area looks suitable for firewood, another for berries. Work from what the owner wants to produce, rather than trying to get them interested in a theoretical yield

of something they hadn't thought of for a market that may not exist.

Policies and regulations

In northern Spain, mushroom picking is increasing, along with attempts to control it with permit systems. A 2014 omnibus survey showed that people generally accept the regulations, but want licence fees to be invested back into forest management. In Wales, StarTree has come at an opportune time for influencing newly-emerging Welsh government policy, for example in revising the cumbersome “Woodlands and You” system for permits and leases. In Slovenia, NWFPs are marginal, but awareness is increasing. 70-80 per cent of forests are in private ownership, but NWFPs are accessible through a tradition of everyman's rights. A fascinating Romanian study looked at the discrepancies between logged, official, licensed foraging and actual activity. Examples were observed very directly, among hawkers trading along the road leading to the university – and within the researcher's own family!

Summing up, academic lead Irina Prokofieva remarked that clearly, each region is very different. No blanket recommendations can be made. Sometimes top-down action is needed, other times such initiatives are launched but just die out. It all depends on the vision: some countries have a strong vision for NWFPs, others do not.

Trade and innovation

Many innovations exist, intriguing but not all applicable to Scotland. In Castille y Leon in north-western Spain, coops are more common than private limited companies and the forest belongs to the village. In the Waldmärker Region of Germany, venison struggles with a poor reputation due to lack of basic hygiene regulations. LEADER funding has helped develop products from Austria's iconic stone pine. Huge network contracts between Italian traders protect their own trade; between them a few traders control around half of world trade in *Boletus* mushrooms. In Scotland, our database of NWFP contacts and businesses currently stands at over 400 entries, with many inventive ideas among them.

The next day there was more, including a paper on landowner and hunter rights across Europe to which Reforesting Scotland has since contributed. The easiest way to summarise my notes from the meeting is to say this: there are far, far too many stories coming out of StarTree to summarise in one article. This is why the focus through much of 2016 will be on telling those stories. The StarTree website will remain online for five years after the project ends, as a vehicle for showcasing project outputs. Look out then for the Innovation Generator; for accessible, modular summary reports; for a wiki database of NWFP regulations and legislation across Europe; for case studies and examples of NWFP businesses and business ideas; and a plethora of reports and papers, some of which are already online (www.star-tree.eu/results).

It starts with the next General Assembly meeting, in Bangor, north Wales. This time, instead of field trips, or a roomful of researchers talking to each other, NWFP businesses and stakeholders will come to a Wild Forest Products Fair on 27 May 2016 – see box for more information, and we'll maybe see you there.

Emma Chapman is Reforesting Scotland's Project Manager for StarTree (www.reforestingscotland.org/projects/startree). For more information about RS's StarTree work or the Wild Forest Products Fair, email Emma on startree@reforestingscotland.org

Wild Forest Products Fair Glynllifon, North Wales, Friday 27 May 2016

Celebrating the innovation and diversity of small scale enterprises using wild forest products across Europe.

- Marketplace of stalls open to the public
- Stalls from each region displaying key results and example products
- Forest product businesses from around Europe
- Presentations and seminars on StarTree findings and business development
- Peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge and skills

Stalls will be free of charge to invited attendees.

Contact startree@reforestingscotland.org to express an interest and/or to ask for more details.