



StarTree in Styria

Austria and Scotland are remarkably similar – at least when it comes to non-wood forest products (NWFPs), explains Emma Chapman.

As regular readers may remember, Reforesting Scotland is a partner in the StarTree NWFP research project, whose six-monthly meetings are held in different regions of Europe. In April 2014, StarTree met in Neuberg an der Mürz, two hours from Vienna via a spectacular railway that snakes around and through steep hillsides on the way up towards the mountains, in the region of Styria. Our hosts, worried we might be snowbound, urged us to bring warm clothing. In fact, the days were bright and warm and we had backpacked our woollies all the way from Scotland for nothing. The warning was not wrong, it is just that Austrian spring weather is unpredictable – a first reminder of Scotland!

StarTree meetings mean two intensive days of powerpoints, spreadsheets and academic discussions, and one day for field trips. This meeting felt different, because we stayed in a small country town. The places we had come to see were mostly within walking distance, and our evening meals featured wild garlic soup and spring herb salads.

The connection between the research and the place felt real, and we could absorb local knowledge over the whole three days.

Our first over-dinner speaker was from the regional forestry institute. He explained that berries and mushrooms were free to all under traditional 'everyman's rights', making it hard for a landowner like the forestry institute to make any income from them. He talked of forests as venues: forest schools, team-building days, bushcraft, wine tastings, concerts; courses on mushroom and herb collecting. He regaled us with innovations: a Mao Tse-tung path in the Christmas trees; using the intense flavours of wild forest fruits; planting hazel varieties from Turkey and Siberian pine nut trees; bow hunting, bow-making; pecan nuts... By the end, perhaps distracted by the flowers and leaves in my salad, I had lost track of which were realities, and which were simply ideas. Ingenuity, potential, and high-value use of low-volumes of produce – all familiar themes for NWFPs in Scotland.

Wild food walks

The first field trip was even more familiar. We met in the hotel lobby, and a local woman led us just across the road, to look for wild herbs and flowers in a place so heavily used by people and dogs that no food forager would choose it. We picked, stood listening to herb lore and discussing familiar and unfamiliar plant names, then went inside to make something with ingredients picked in advance, somewhere clean, by an experienced gatherer. Just like wild food walks over here! Except that (despite my execrable pronunciation of Scots names) we can usually manage without an interpreter. Even the motivation was similar: at the end our guide enthused about passing traditional knowledge to the next generation, about increasing people's skills and options in the face of an uncertain future, about her own love of plants and their uses. I gave her a flyer for the Scottish Wild Harvests Association (SWHA), hoping that, despite the language barrier, she would understand that there are like minds over here.

Each wild food walk brings something new. Back in the hotel we had an array of familiar plants – coltsfoot flowers, nettle, deadnettle, watercress, wild garlic, celandine – but a new way of preserving and using them. Herb salt: simply put a few good pinches of herbs into a food grinder, add some rock salt, and whizz



them up together. There must be quite a loss of food value, compared with eating fresh greens, but it seems a nice way to keep savoury spring flavours throughout the coming year.

Next was a family Christmas tree business – a long way from foraging. With timber prices insecure, the current farmer's father started this sideline 30 years ago. Gradually, it came out that this was kept going partly because the busy season fits neatly with the quiet season for farming, but also so as not to disappoint long-term customers. When asked if he would like to increase this part of the business, the young farmer was diplomatic, rather than enthusiastic.

I confess, my attention drifted. On the other side of the steep valley, south-facing and sheltered by forest, was a line of beehives. As we talked, occasional bees hummed among us, interested not in the few spring flowers but in the Christmas trees. A couple of us looked more closely and saw that they were foraging for honey dew, finding what they could in an intensively-farmed, blossom-poor valley. Later in the year they would be moved to higher ground, to Alpine meadows full of flowers. In the meantime, an unplanned yield from trees was helping them get by.

In Scotland, hedgerow, woodland and street trees provide a similar service (and sometimes a crop) before bees are moved out to the hills to feast on heather. The other foraging interest from this visit was incidental as well; a parting drink of green larch cone schnapps, provided by our hosts. Schnapps was a recurring motif of our visit. I remember American NFWP researcher Marla Emery commenting that Scots will ferment just about anything! Making schnapps, it seemed, was the Austrian equivalent.

Wild food market

We returned to find our meeting room transformed into an NFWP producers' market. The stallholders gave speeches, we shopped, and finally all joined in a discussion. Our Austrian colleagues explained that at first they had doubted there was enough happening in Austria for StarTree to study, but they had been surprised at how much they found:

- As in Scotland, farm holidays are a success story, but one that is only partly supported by NFWPs.
- There is a chestnut revival movement. The trees, once ubiquitous, are down to remnants, forgotten, neglected. Work is underway to develop new products, and to rediscover skills in harvesting, in processing and in caring for the trees. All depends heavily on enthusiasts, and co-operation, as does our own traditional orchard revival.
- The Naturpark Specialities brand highlights the association between products and the beautiful areas they come from: mushroom salt, flavoured vinegars, jams and honey – most provide only a part-time income.
- Swiss pine products have been a success because the tree is associated strongly with a particular place.
- In our host region, Styria, deer live in the forest, and hunting them requires patience and skill. At last, a contrast with Scotland! – and an inspiring one, at that. I bought some venison sausages, in celebration of deer in balance with their natural habitat.

As in Scotland, so in Austria. NFWPs are fascinating, full of potential; they capture people's imagination, enthuse them, add richness to their lives. They can produce food, pleasure, medicine, diversity. But they are unlikely to make you rich, even if you are dealing in luxury products. It can also be hard to make a connection between owning land and getting a return from NFWPs, unless you domesticate and grow the wild, or make a business out of hosting other people's experiences.

Success depends as much on marketing, on a hook, as on the raw product, with an emphasis on purity, quality, local provenance or tourism. Much comes down to individuals, their abilities and motivation. A man might be the best producer in region, but will his sons want to continue after him? Making pine soaps for the tourists starts as a hobby, but what do you do when you start with two kilos, and then are asked for 20 tonnes? Appropriately, among our number was Sheila Bates of Croft 7. A long-term Reforesting Scotland member, Sheila is also a key member of SWHA, and a small-scale NFWP producer in her own right. I hope she learned something from the visits and discussions, and I know some of my colleagues learned from her!

And my low-carbon transport mission? No buses this time. Instead, I took a train down to London, where I met Sheila, and four colleagues from Wales. We shared a six-berth sleeper cabin, and travelled by train all the way to Austria and back, having our own StarTree meetings along the way.

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