

# Good harvesting practice guides: a response to changing cultures of foraging

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## The issue is ...

The wild forest products sector is changing in many parts of Europe. Wild food is becoming fashionable in countries where the culture of using it had previously declined. This has led to increases both in trade and in recreational picking. These changes affect how much is being picked, and who is picking.

This can cause problems in several ways:

- interference with land management;
- breaches of local law and etiquette, often due to lack of transmission of existing/traditional knowledge among newer pickers;
- adverse impacts on natural resources and wild habitats.

These developments lead to (1) emergence of harvesting codes of practice in regions where they did not exist before or were forgotten, or (2) strengthening and better communication of harvesting codes of practice in regions where they existed before, and formalisation of their role.

The aim of the codes can be:

- to enable conflict-free commercial activity;
- to protect wild forest resources;
- to protect the rights of local people or landowners.

They are developed by commercial foragers, by researchers, by government agencies, or by a combination of stakeholders working together. The latter is seen especially when there is externally-led learning on harvesting practices, as occurred in Castilla-y-Leon and in Scotland.

## From a StarTree perspective

Research shows that the emergence of good harvesting practices tends to be triggered by several factors:

- perception of the adverse impact of harvesting practices on the resource;
- the degree of economic dependence on the resource (both for purposes of commercialization and for livelihood and subsistence);
- attitudes and values of involved foragers, landowners and local community;
- strength of local social networks and the degree of trust among members of local community (i.e. sufficient social capital).

Harvesting practice norms tend to evolve slowly as a result of a learning process among local harvesters, who gain knowledge regarding the impact of harvesting practices on the sustainability of the resource and modify their practices accordingly (voluntary conservationists, see stages 2 & 3 in Figure 1). Rudimentary norms emerge as soon as foragers start to indicate to other pickers how they should or should not harvest wild forest products (punishers, stage 3 in Figure 1). If harvesting norms result in the improvement of the resource base due to the spread of sustainable harvesting practices, they tend to solidify in the society and can even become fully formalized, for example, included in Forest Acts or other formal harvesting regulations (stages 4 & 5 in Figure 1). However, if harvesting norms do not lead to the desirable outcome, the norms tend to disintegrate and

pressure on the resource increases until new and better norms emerge.

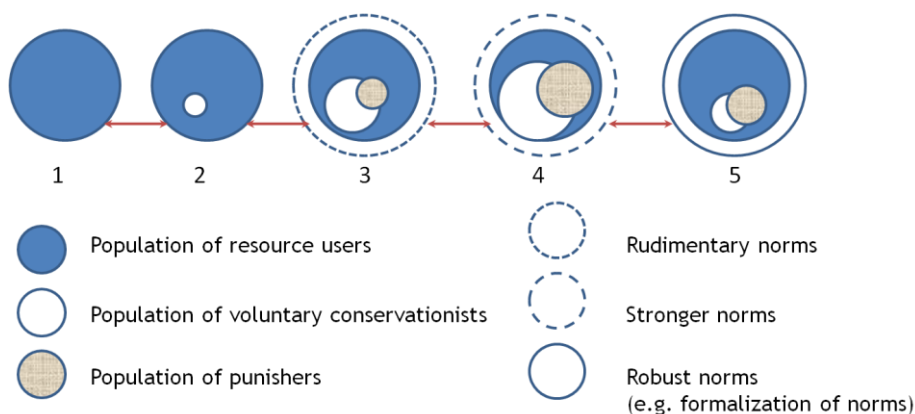


Figure 1. Evolution of harvesting norms. Adapted from Brooks (2010, *Ecological Economics*).

A study of 10 regions in the StarTree project identified the evolutionary process behind the emergence of harvesting norms. Moreover, region-specific interaction between harvesting norms and formal harvesting regulations has been shown as a decisive factor in determining which stage the development of harvesting institutions reaches – in some regions harvesting norms remain largely informal, taking the form of codified traditional harvesting practices (e.g. Finland) or voluntary codes of conduct (e.g. Scotland), whereas in some other regions harvesting practices become part of a complex tissue of formal harvesting regulations (e.g. Italy, Spain).

This has been happening in different ways in different parts of Europe.

## Case 1:

Finland has a very strong culture of foraging, supported by "everyman's rights". Also the commercial berry and mushroom sector is significant. Berries and mushrooms are mainly exported unprocessed and in big quantities. The number of domestic commercial pickers has declined and for the past 10 years the commercial berry picking has primarily been done by migrant workers from Thailand and other countries.

The picking of migrant pickers is more intensive than the traditional Finnish way of picking for sale. In addition, the Finnish cultural non-written picking habits are unfamiliar for the foreign pickers, which has caused some picking-related problems. Still, a StarTree survey found that most problems were not concerning the intensity of the picking, but the picking habits and behaviour while picking. For example, picking too close to houses or other pickers, damaging the shrubs, damaging the quality of berries or leaving trash to nature were often mentioned to be irritating. Finnish people would know that those habits are not acceptable, but some migrant pickers did not.

The wild food trade association, Arctic Flavours (<http://www.arctic-flavours.fi/>), and berry companies, responded to this problem by creating training material to avoid emerging problems. The Arctic Flavours material can be found in Thai, Russian, English and many other languages. In addition to the law related to harvesting and everyman's rights, the cultural non-written norms, such as the appropriate distance from houses while picking, are presented in the training material. The material also contains instructions on how to pick good quality produce and maintain the quality during storage and transportation to buyer. Nowadays before pickers start picking, most companies have education days, where they use Arctic Flavours' or their own training material.

Pickers may sell directly to professional kitchens, local consumers, retailers and local shops. If they sell berries on into the bulk supply chain, the company which buys from them has to record the contact details of each picker and the area each batch of berries came from. For organic berries there is a more exacting scheme, with written standards which companies and individual pickers sign up to.



## Case 2: UK

The UK has very limited forest cover, and a largely urban population, but despite this there is a new movement of people learning to understand and use wild forest products (WFPs).

In Scotland, this emerging culture was recognised in the early 2000s. Three voluntary harvesting codes were developed in response to perceived problems (<http://www.forestharvest.org.uk/guidelines/harvestingguidelines.htm>). These were the Scottish Wild Mushroom Code, the Scottish Bulb Collection Code and the Scottish Moss Collection Code. Each code was developed by groups of stakeholders, brought together by a paid researcher. Funders included three government agencies, Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission Scotland and Scottish Enterprise, along with the Scottish Forestry Trust. Supporting organisations included Plantlife, Reforesting Scotland, the Partnership Against Wildlife Crime, and the British Mycological Society.



The situation evolved as increasing numbers of Eastern Europeans came to Scotland, bringing with them a stronger traditional culture of foraging, especially for mushrooms, but without an understanding of Scottish land and access norms. In 2010 a Polish translation of the Scottish Wild Mushroom Code was published.

Meanwhile attitudes to picking WFPs remain so positive in Scotland that the government conservation body, Scottish Natural Heritage, runs a project which encourages individuals to learn about foraging and using wild foods (<http://scotlandsnaturallarder.co.uk/events/>).

In 2015, British and other European foraging teachers and commercial pickers created an Association of Foragers (<http://www.foragers-association.org>) to provide a forum for professional support, sharing of knowledge and best practice. One of their first collective acts was to create a statement of Principles and Practice, to demonstrate their credentials as responsible foragers. In England, recent legal disagreements between government agencies and foragers have resulted in the AOF requesting a voice at the consultation stage before restrictions are unilaterally decided and implemented. England has a higher population than Scotland, leading to more pressure on resources. It has not had Scotland's recent history of support for foraging or of government agency support for developing voluntary harvesting codes.



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## Case 3: Spain

Harvesting practices have been part of traditional culture in Catalonia (Spain), as in Finland, but as more and more pickers harvest mushrooms, some new pickers are not necessarily aware of these practices. In Poblet protected area a formal licence was introduced in 2012, produced by the governing body of the park, which brings together public and private local stakeholders representing different interests. When acquiring the picking permit, pickers receive an information leaflet on how mushrooms have to be harvested in the Park. These norms are based on traditional practices and scientific recommendations.

In Castilla-y-Leon (Central-North Spain) mushroom picking was an activity traditionally practiced by people coming from other regions. Limited knowledge about how to harvest mushrooms

was held by local inhabitants. In the last few decades, the mushroom trade in the region has grown considerably, with local restaurants using mushrooms, but mainly with intermediaries reselling mushrooms to wholesalers. The need for good harvesting practices was brought up by scientists and forest managers, issuing a norm but also providing some training. So the learning process of the local population about good harvesting practices relied firstly on the quality standards required by the buying companies (which put pressure on pickers to keep up the quality of the mushrooms supplied), next on the formal guides, and finally on pickers' own experience. This is an example of development of formal norms without a participatory process.

## Findings



A lack of communication between stakeholders can lead to problems.



The commercial sector will take proactive steps to avoid problems and conflict.



Forest managers and conservation bodies will also act if they see a threat to the interests which they represent.



Good harvesting practice guides can make a positive difference either in preventing disagreements or in reducing them after problems have emerged.



Different processes are followed in different regions.



The situation is still evolving, as new cultures of WFP harvesting develop in different regions of Europe.