

Poster

Alaska ethnobotany project: non-timber forest products in the 49th state

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Introduction. The commercial harvest of non-timber forest products has been an active industry in the U.S. Pacific Northwest for several decades. Only recently has this harvest become a noticeably common practice in the state of Alaska. The State's Division of Land, the permitting agency for commercial harvesting on state-managed land, recognizes the need for an improved understanding of the harvested species and their response to harvest pressure, as well as the multi-faceted issues of their importance to traditional cultures, subsistence, and personal use. Few commercial harvesters are currently in compliance with permitting requirements and a new system for management needs to be put into place.

Objectives. Managing commercial harvest to balance commerce, subsistence, and sustainability is the focus of the Alaska Ethnobotany Project. With a considerable portion of Alaska's land in public hands, a wide and diverse cultural representation, including Alaska Native cultures, and the dependence of many Alaskans on wild foods for a subsistence lifestyle, the state wants to be well informed and skilled in its management decisions for commercial harvest of non-timber forest products.

Methods. Existing literature, current researchers, and on-the-ground harvesters from many backgrounds were consulted and the Alaska Non-Timber Forest Products Harvest Manual was compiled to guide commercial harvesters and begin the process of making the permitting system more user-friendly and thus encourage legal and responsible commercial harvesting. New regulations are being drafted and education programs planned to improve the level of compliance with permitting requirements and the State's capacity to manage commercial harvests. Biological studies of harvest impacts to plant populations will also be conducted.

Results. The project is still underway, but preliminary feedback shows support for the State's efforts to develop a functioning non-timber forest products management program and to research the unique aspects of non-timber forest products in the 49th State. Public review periods for some of the initial steps in the changing of regulations are expected to begin during the summer of 2007, as well as extensive biological research on harvest impacts. A comprehensive program is expected to be in place in 2008.

Conclusion. In a state as unique and diverse as Alaska, many considerations have to be weighed in managing a broad and newly recognized resource such as non-timber forest products. The cultural and spiritual significance of many of the species of plants, the dependence on them for personal use and subsistence lifestyles, and their potential development into commercially viable products have to be balanced by the State. The State is now making headway in developing a user-friendly program "to develop, conserve and enhance natural resources for present and future Alaskans" (DNR mission statement).

Keywords: management, subsistence, cultural, permitting, regulations

Selected References

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